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CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meyer and Leah Mindle Lipszyc, Gam Zu Chabad

The Shlichus Saga: the Detroit Years Part II

By **Chaya Chazan**

Rabbi Berel Shemtov was in many ways a trendsetter for shluchim. So it was no surprise when his idea to hold a Jewish music concert was met with raised eyebrows.

The only known singers were chazzanim, and who would come to a cantorial concert?

Nevertheless, Rabbi Shemtov hosted the first annual Jewish concert of Chabad of Michigan. He made it around the Chanukah season and brought in chassidishe singers and dancers from New York. It became known as The Chanukah Chassidic Happening, held in downtown Detroit and attracting close to 3,000 attendees.

Every year, Rabbi Shemtov would try to promote someone or something unique as an added attraction to the concert. One year, he turned to me for my input as he'd already headlined everyone he could think of. I had a great idea for him: several months earlier, one of our mekuravim, Gittle Wolnez, got married to a mekurav of Rabbi Nussy Gurary of Buffalo, New York, named David Lazerson.



At the wedding, which took place on the bride's home turf, in Michigan, the groom's friends goaded him to take over the drummer's place in the band. He did so and was fabulous. I was mesmerized just watching him play!

So when Rabbi Shemtov turned to me for an idea for the concert, I immediately thought of David Lazerson. I had no doubt there were other talented musicians in yeshiva with him and suggested they could form a band to play together. Highlighting a band of current and former yeshiva students would showcase the product of our schools and Chabad houses and make a strong impression.

It was a novel idea. Bands and singers that are now well known hadn't even produced their first records yet, let alone a ragtag group of yeshiva guys. I called David and asked if he could think of some friends to join his band. He barely had to think before affirming that there were other excellent musicians in the yeshiva with whom to put together a band.

Dovid Lazerson, later to become well known as Dr. Laz, played the drums; Moshe Tanenbaum, later to become famous as Uncle Moishe, played guitar; Avrohom Levine, now an upstanding member of the Chabad community in Chicago, played accordion; and Moshe Schwartz, now a melamed in Crown Heights, played the flute. They recorded a demo and sent it to Rabbi Shemtov, who was impressed enough to hire them as the feature of the upcoming concert.

At that time, I was visiting the University of Michigan twice a week and had already gotten to know many students. I wanted to hold a second concert in Ann Arbor for the college kids. Rabbi Shemtov was worried there wouldn't be enough demand to fill the room. A failed concert would damage the reputation of Chanukah Chassidic Happening. I proposed a compromise.

A university town is usually full of transient inhabitants, for the most part students, who are there only for the four years or so of their studies. However, during my bi-weekly trips to Ann Arbor and the University of Michigan campus, I also got to meet some of the permanent inhabitants of the town.

One of the most unique and impressive, a man whom I greatly respected and admired, was Mr. Osias Zwerdling. At the time I met him, he was a spry "young man" of 97 and was looked up to by everyone—the city elders as well as the Jewish establishment—as the patriarch of the city.

He escaped Europe as a fourteen-year-old and arrived in Ann Arbor, a Jew alone in a foreign country. Against all odds, he made it on his own and kept his pride in his Jewish identity intact, although he had nothing to rely on besides his own fading memories of his childhood home. He definitely must have come from a very special breed and ancestry, for his moral compass was impeccable.

Despite his advanced age, he took care of himself and did all his own errands in the city, refusing help of any kind. Several times a week, he had a maid come in to do a general house cleaning, but that was all. To my embarrassment, whenever I visited him at home, he insisted on being a good host, getting up and personally bringing me refreshments of water and fresh fruit.

I told Rabbi Shemtov that the concert would be advertised not only to the student body but to the general community as well. Once they heard Mr. Osias Zwerdling was the guest of honor, I was sure the community would come in droves. Rabbi Shemtov grudgingly agreed. I spoke with Mr. Zwerdling, who agreed to be featured at our concert and accept the honor.

The Detroit concert was set for Thursday evening and promised to attract as large a crowd as ever. Our Ann Arbor concert was set for the following Sunday. I reserved a small hall with only 750 seats, but everyone was worried that even that was too many.

"Your first major event in Ann Arbor cannot be an empty concert hall!" Rabbi Shemtov warned me.

I also heard that influential people, including one of the Jewish deans of the university and a close friend of Mr. Zwerdling's son, a Washington bigshot, both tried to get Mr. Zwerdling to back out of being our honoree at the concert. They said it would be an embarrassment to him because no one from the community would come and the hall would be empty.

"I gave my word," he insisted. "I always keep my word."

The Thursday concert in Detroit was a great success, as usual. The "Morristown Moving Spirits," as we dubbed the group, were better than our wildest dreams and made a terrific hit.

The concert was also memorable for another reason: it featured a very unique live stage display for the Rebbe's Shabbos Candle-Lighting Campaign. One of our mekuravim, Mrs. Rus Krieger, had been a professional entertainer in her pre-Torah days. She volunteered to organize a live stage display to promote mivtza neshek. And what an amazing job she did!

Ford Auditorium, where the concert was held, had a beautiful, fully equipped stage with all types of professional lighting and had three sets of massive ceiling-to-floor curtains, each set a number of feet behind the next.

The concert was divided into two parts with an intermission between them. Just before the break, the auditorium was totally darkened, and intro music began to play for the song *"My Mother's Shabbos Candles."* Twelve-year-old Yossie Korf gave a most beautiful and moving rendition of the song while the first curtain slowly opened up to the scene of a family standing around a Shabbos table with the wife and her daughters lighting the Shabbos candles. As the song continued, the second curtain slowly opened to the scene of three tables with women and girls all lighting candles. The song came to its finale as the third curtain finished opening to five more tables and still more women and girls lighting their candles. The entire tableau was so incredible and moving that there was an audible gasp from the entire audience.

Then it was announced that there would be a twenty-minute intermission, and the audience was invited to please visit the tables set up in the hallway. There was a beautiful neshek table with free candlesticks and brochures for women who wanted to begin lighting Shabbos candles.

My wife had made a cake dummy of a Shabbos table complete with a very realistic lacy tablecloth, candlesticks with Shabbos candles, and challahs peeking out from under their cover—accurate down to the tiniest details like wee slices of carrots on the gefilte fish. One of the women in the community had made a large revolving display of a woman and girl lighting Shabbos candles.

There was another table encouraging men to commit to putting on tefillin. And there was a third table with a display of Jewish homes made from milk cartons with the various mitzvos which the Rebbe was encouraging people to take upon themselves, such as kosher mezuzos, Jewish books, tzedaka, kashrus, etc., and cards encouraging everyone to commit to any of the mivtzoyim.

The line of women who wanted the candlesticks so they could start lighting Shabbos candles was so long that, even though we had a large number of them, the supply ran out, and we had to mail them afterwards to the remaining women!

There was no question that the unusually large number of commitments that were signed was a direct result of that awesome stage display just before the intermission.

As far as the ticket sales for the Sunday concert in Ann Arbor—things weren't going as well. As of Friday morning, only seven tickets were sold! I knew that unless I came up with some wild idea—and a miracle, to boot—I was going to have one big disaster on my hands.

So I asked David and his band to help me out by coming to Ann Arbor after Shabbos and setting up shop on the busiest corner in town. I hoped it would interest many more students and increase attendance at the concert. David spoke it over with the others and, baruch Hashem, they all were game. Rabbi Kagan A"H and his wife agreed to come as well.

So right after havdallah, we all headed out to Ann Arbor to try to literally "drum up" business. We were about to set up at a busy intersection when it began to pour. The streets were empty, and the few people braving the weather hurried past, their coat collars turned up so they never even saw us.

I wasn't ready to give up yet. In a town filled with college students, they had to be *somewhere*! We asked around until we finally found out that there was a newly released movie with great ratings that everyone was waiting to see. It was called *Paper Chase,* and it was making its debut that night in the university theater. It was such a hit that the university opened all four theaters into one big room, and all the seats were sold out.

We immediately rushed there, approached the manager, and asked him if he could delay the movie for five minutes to let our band do a short concert teaser.

He refused so strongly that we knew we couldn't wheedle our way into an agreement. But then G-d stepped in. The projector broke, and the manager needed something to keep the students from getting disgruntled.

"Five minutes," he grunted, turning to us and motioning to the stage.

All four band members rushed onto the stage and really gave it all they had. After five minutes, they stopped, and the students started clapping wildly and yelling, "More, more!"

We looked to the manager standing in the back. He rolled his eyes and motioned, *go on!*

The band started up again, and Rabbi Kagan and I, wearing our long black kapotas, ran down the aisle, jumped up onto the stage and started dancing. The place was rolling! A few of the male college students even joined us on center stage! After another five minutes, we stopped, and again everyone was yelling for more.

"You want more?" we yelled, and the crowd roared back.

"Tomorrow at 1:00 PM, the *Morristown Moving Spirits* will be performing at the Mendelsohn Theater! Come then and you'll hear plenty more!" we promised.

Dovid joked that Michigan comes from the Yiddish word *meshugeneh*, and the crowd roared with laughter.

We began packing up and heading out. Meanwhile, since it was quite late, the manager had already dimmed the lights and started the projectors. As was usual in movie theaters, before the start of the main feature, they showed previews of an upcoming film.

We heard the loud sounds of warplanes taking off when suddenly there was an eruption of laughter throughout the theater. It was so unexpected that we all turned around to see what caused the laughter. We were bowled over when it seemed the words *TORA, TORA, TORA* were coming from the screen! We later learned that it was a preview of an upcoming Japanese war movie. But the irony of its timing was not lost on anyone in that theater.

The next day, the *Morristown Moving Spirits* played to a standing-room-only audience. In addition to the newly founded fan club of the band, there was a large showing from the community, who'd come to honor Mr. Zwerdling. The mayor of the town presented Mr. Zwerdling with the key to the city, and we gave him a large, beautiful plaque.

Once again, Hashem had performed a miracle for the Rebbe's shluchim.

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