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## Rabbi Yaakov and Edla Biderman, Chabad of Vienna, Austria

# It's the Rebbe's Show

By Chaya Chazan

**As newlyweds in 1980, we began our search for shlichus in Europe. We were advised to seek a rabbinical post, as we'd have more reach and influence as a rav of a city than we could as strangers.**

A position was open in Dusseldorf, Germany, and it sounded perfect - but when we wrote to the Rebbe about the offer, we received no answer.

One day, Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik a"h, the shliach in Italy, entered kollel and gave me a hearty slap on the back.

"I hear you're going to Vienna!" he congratulated me.

"Vienna?" I repeated, stupefied. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Well, you'd better go to the main office and speak to Rabbi Hadakov then. I was just there, asking about setting up a shliach in Vienna, but I was told the Bidermans are already set to go there."

I visited Rabbi Hadakov's office after Mincha, and asked for clarification.

"It's not an order," he told me. "It's a proposal."

"But I wrote to the Rebbe about a position in Dusseldorf! We're still waiting for an answer."

"So write to the Rebbe again, and explain that I proposed a position in Vienna," Rabbi Hadakov advised me.

My wife and I immediately composed a letter to the Rebbe. Within ten minutes, we received an answer with the Rebbe's approval and a bracha for success.

We hastily sold the furniture we'd only recently bought for our new home, and used the money to buy two plane tickets to Austria. Two weeks later, we were in the air.



Like many European countries, Austria was once home to a large, flourishing Jewish community, and produced outstanding talmidei chachamim and rabbanim. With the rise of Hitler ym"s, himself an Austrian native, all that life withered away into wisps of smoke.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the conquering Allies divided Vienna into zones, each controlled by another ruling power. DP camps in Austria attracted Jews by the droves. Many of them found economic opportunities in the post-war chaos and confusing borders that enlivened a thriving black market. They never considered Vienna their home; it was merely a stop on their way to freedom, a chance to catch their breath and lick their wounds. They considered their stay transitory, and felt no need to build up a Jewish infrastructure. Although they were there for years, they sent their children away as soon as they could. As time passed, Vienna became a community of the elderly on the brink of collapse. Young Viennese Jews had nothing to stay for.

In the late 70's, an influx of Jewish Soviet immigrants, many Bucharian, Georgian, and other Sefardi communities, breathed new life into Vienna's community. When we arrived, we had our work cut out for us. Many of these immigrants had warm memories of Judaism, but with no shuls or schools around which to center their community, Yiddishkeit fell by the wayside. We immediately threw ourselves into holiday programs, adult education, Shabbos meals, and student engagement. Eventually, we were able to cater to the Sefardi Jews specifically, bringing in a Sefardi rabbi, and helping them establish a shul of their own.

We were the first permanent shluchim in any of the three German-speaking countries, so we created lots of Jewish literature in German.

Although it was already 35 years after the Holocaust, the pallor of the war still hovered over the city. The community was distrustful of strangers, and most were too afraid to admit they were Jewish. They weren't wrong - you could never tell which clerk, doctor, or government official had worn the Nazi uniform just decades before. Why would they willingly put their names down on the Jewish community list when those same lists had once been

used to identify and eradicate their families? It was an uphill battle to find these souls that didn't want to be found, and teach them to take pride in their Judaism.

We knew the best way to begin would be with the youth. We opened an after-school program for kids attending public school. In those few precious hours, we tried to impart a love and passion for Yiddishkeit. In addition to teaching them the alef beis, about Yomim Tovim, and Jewish history, we felt it was just as important to show them the joy of Yiddishkeit. I played spirited games of soccer with the boys, and my wife decorated art projects with the girls.

Eventually, our afternoon program turned into a full-fledged preschool. Slowly but surely, we began to make inroads. Now, 44 years later, Vienna boasts 30 shluchim couples, 6 Chabad houses, an elementary and high school with over 600 students, a yeshiva, a girl's seminary, and an accredited Jewish university with over 300 students that offers both European and American college credit! Baruch Hashem! The main backbone of the Viennese Jewish community today is largely composed of our graduates, who are now keeping Shabbos, kosher, and sending the next generation to our schools.

We are so fortunate to have a network of shluchim working together as a family. Our successes cannot be attributed to any one individual; they speak to the power of our dedicated group as a whole. Everything we've achieved is due solely to the Rebbe's brachos and Hashem's munificent blessings.

We regularly updated the Rebbe on our progress by sending in *duchim*, reports of our efforts in Vienna. We were surprised to receive a reply to one of our *duchim* with the Rebbe's handwriting, wishing us success in our new preschool. The thought of opening a preschool hadn't even occurred to us, and we most certainly hadn't written anything about it.

A few days later, we were approached by a group of parents, asking us to open a preschool for their children. With the Rebbe's bracha already in hand, it was clear what we needed to do.

Leon Zelman was a prestigious member of the Viennese community. He ran the Jewish Welcome Center, a government funded organization that encouraged and incentivized Viennese Jews to return to the city. He was one of the first people I put tefillin on when I first arrived. Over the years, we kept up a steady friendship. Whenever I could, I would stop by his office, put tefillin on with him, and catch up.

One morning, he called me with an interesting invitation.

"The American ambassador, Mr. Ronald Lauder, son of the famous cosmetics magnate, would like to meet with you. Can you come down to the embassy?"

In short, concise sentences, Mr. Lauder explained why he'd requested a meeting. Austria had been thrown into an uproar by the recent presidential elections. The favor-

ite candidate, Kurt Waldheim, after completing a stint as Secretary-General of the United Nations, had been exposed as a former Nazi soldier. Jewish activists worldwide protested his candidacy. In a fit of pique, the Austrians gave him their overwhelming support, and he won the election in a landslide.

Mr. Lauder wanted to firmly establish public friendly relations with the Viennese Jewish community, and asked Mr. Zelman who would be best for such a task. At that time, we'd just opened our school, and I invited the ambassador to visit.

I could see he was disappointed by the rundown building and overcrowded classrooms I took him to, but he was impressed by our dedication nonetheless. Instead of staying for fifteen minutes as originally arranged, he stayed for over an hour, sitting on a small chair, chatting with the children.

He was thoughtful as I walked him back to his car.

"I'd like to help you expand your school," he offered. "But a building carrying the name 'Lauder' must look dignified and respectable. I'll fund a building in one of the newer, more developed areas of the city."

I was torn. I couldn't imagine turning down such a generous offer, especially since it meant we could help that many more Jewish children, but the community we were catering for lived in *that* neighborhood. Building a school in the fancy part of town wouldn't help them.

I debated both options in my mind for a while, until the perfect solution seemed to fall right into my lap. I heard there was a section of a city park that actually belonged to the Jewish community. Since it was private land, we could use it to build our new school!

Mr. Lauder was excited, and we immediately got to planning. Unfortunately, once word of the project leaked out, public opinion was vehemently against us. Protestors claimed we'd ruin the natural beauty of the park, and had no right to build privately. Even some in the Jewish community turned against us! The mayor and other government officials, with whom I'd always been on good terms, suddenly stopped taking my calls.

"Maybe we should back off and find somewhere else?" I suggested.

"No," Mr. Lauder insisted. "This is a multi-million dollar project, and too much planning has gone into it to draw back now. Either we build there, or we don't build at all."

I couldn't find a way out. Suddenly, I remembered I hadn't written to the Rebbe recently! I immediately sat down and penned a letter. *Rebbe, I'm not building this school for myself, but for your children! Please help us make this*

*project a success!* I faxed it to the Ohel, asking someone to read it on my behalf by the Rebbe's tziyon.

A week later, Mr. Zelman called with another intriguing introduction. The owner of the largest tabloid in Austria, with a readership of over 3 million, wanted to meet with me.

"I'm getting older, Rabbi," he told me. "Before my time is up, I need to make amends. Years ago, I had an anti-Semitic journalist who wove his prejudices into his articles. At the time, I did nothing to stop him. It's giving me no peace, and I want to know what I could do to make up for it."

"Most European journals are anti-Israel," I answered. "You can help by publishing pro-Israel pieces."

His eyes lit up. "Great idea!" he said.

For the next few weeks, the tabloid ran a variety of articles in praise and defense of Israel.

"It's not enough," the owner told me. "I need to do more!"

"You know, lately I've noticed the power the media holds," I told him, explaining how public opinion had halted our construction plans.

"Say no more," he said.

The next day, the headlines screamed *Who is Against Children?* A few days later, they proclaimed *Children Belong With Trees!* A projected map and picture of the park, complete with the school, promised that the park's beauty would be untouched.

"Whatever happened with that project we discussed?" the mayor asked me, a couple of days later.

"I'm sorry - I've been so busy and couldn't get back to you," apologized another official. "Let's figure out how to make the school a reality!"

Many have been lucky to experience miracles in their lives, but not all have it so clearly documented. I have newspaper clippings from March 1997, all decrying the school and protesting its construction. Articles dated April 1997 say the complete opposite. What happened in between? One letter to the Rebbe.

My meeting with Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Nazi hunter and author, was moving for both of us.

Like any good Chabad chassid, I offered him a chance to put on tefillin.

"No," he refused. "Ever since the Holocaust, I will not put on tefillin, or step foot in a synagogue."

"The Lubavitcher Rebbe -" I began.

"You're an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe?" he asked. When I nodded, he began rolling up his sleeve. "I've only put on tefillin once since the Holocaust," he told me. "That was at the Kotel, right after the Six Day War. But I respect the Rebbe so much, I'm willing to make a second exception for you, as his representative."

His eyes welled up with tears as I bound the leather straps around his arm.

My grandfather, the Lelover Rebbe, sent two of my uncles to the Rebbe for a yechidus. The Rebbe told them to report to my grandfather that his ainekel in Vienna was doing wondrous, great things.

We'd only recently moved to Vienna, and were still struggling to find our footing on shlichus. So, when my uncle repeated the Rebbe's words to my grandfather, my father, who was there as well, interjected, "But I've been speaking with Yankel. He didn't tell me about anything particularly great or wondrous!"

My grandfather put his head down for a few minutes, and then looked up at my father.

"When a tzaddik like the Lubavitcher Rebbe says something, he's able to see the past, present, and future all at once. If the Rebbe wasn't talking about now, he's surely referring to the future. So certainly, there *will* be wonders and greatness!"

Reflecting on the great leaps Vienna has taken in Judaism in the past forty years, the Rebbe's words have most certainly come true. As was proven to us over and over, from the very beginning of our shlichus, it's the Rebbe's show. All we can do is try not to stand in the way.

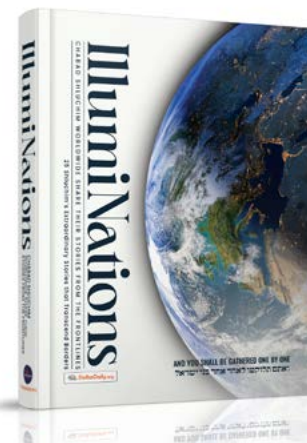
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