

IllumiNations

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Dedicated in Memory of Harav Moshe Kotlarsky - Pioneering A Generation of The Rebbe's Shluchim

Rabbi Menachem and Chanie Gruzman, Chabad of Salzburg, Austria

Shlichus on Salzburg's Ski Slopes

By Chaya Chazan

For most people, moving to Austria would be considered a "challenging" shlichus. But for me, as a born and bred Viennese shliach, it was the most natural thing in the world.

In fact, it felt so natural, I had to be convinced into it, as I was looking for something a little less familiar. In the end, we decided it would be a good fit for us.

Unlike most of the continent, Salzburg only has a small history of Jewish life. The highest recorded number of Jews living in the city at any one point was around 200.

When we first moved, we knew of exactly *one* Jew living here. Since Salzburg draws a lot of tourists, we knew there was still potential to impact a lot more people and moved anyway. We were told that finding more than ten local Jews would be unlikely, and that our efforts would basically be concentrated on providing kosher food and services to tourists during the "on" seasons. It's only been a couple of years, but we've already increased that number to over 30! Every couple of weeks, we discover another Jew living here and add them to our growing community!

We were looking for an office space to use as our Chabad house, and arranged a showing at a *Besichtigung*, where a friendly Austrian agent showed us around an available space.

With his pale blue eyes and sandy colored hair, I was almost shocked to hear myself ask him, "Excuse me, are you Jewish?" I regretted the question immediately. I'd lived in Austria my whole life and knew there weren't many Jewish roots hidden in the Germanic faces around me.



"No," he replied, predictably. "My mother is Catholic."

After a moment, he continued, "Well, *her* mother was Jewish, so I guess I'm a quarter Jewish."

"Not at all!" I countered, a huge smile on my face. "You're 100%, fully Jewish!"

One year, we decided to visit the Mirabellgarten, a lush landscaped botanical retreat fronting the Mirabell palace, for a chol hamoad trip.

Of course, we brought our lulav and esrog along with us, just in case we met anyone Jewish. As if our dress - and plant accessories - didn't make us stand out enough, we wished "*Chag sameach*" to everyone we passed. We got many strange looks, but it was worth it, if our greeting was heard - and understood - by even one Jew.

Just ahead of us on the walking path was a young man. I greeted him with the same cheery "*Chag sameach!*" I'd given everyone else. He looked up, startled and confused. When he saw me, his eyes widened.

"Eich yadata? What gave me away?" he asked, in mock consternation.

I tapped my nose. "You've got a Jewish nose!" I joked. "What's your name?"

"Omer*," he answered.

Omer was from a secular kibbutz, but his musical genius had led him to Salzburg's universities, famed for their celebration of the arts. Everything about Yiddishkeit was new to him, but, despite his upbringing, he was open to learning more.

Omer soon became one of our "regulars." I helped him put on tefillin for the first time in his life, and he was even inspired to repeat the experience on another occasion. He joins us for Shabbos almost every week, and is learning more and more with each visit.

Ironically, Omer had to *leave* Israel and come to Austria to find his way back home.

B*h exactly nine months after we moved to Salzburg, we gave birth to our first beautiful shlichus baby! And last week, we had the zechus to meet our second child, a beautiful baby girl, a born Salzburg shlucha!

We needed a minyan to name her. We had eight men gathered in shul. I called everyone on my list, but none could make it, for one reason or another.

While I was busy making calls, Omer decided to take matters into his own hands. He grabbed a tray of cookies from a side table that had been set out as a celebratory treat after our daughter received her name. Holding the tray of kosher cookies aloft, Omer marched out into the street - one of Salzburg's busiest - and tried to flag down any passing Jews. He managed to find a couple of Jewish tourists from France who gladly accepted the cookies and followed him inside.

Omer, the kibbutznik, who'd grown up without a shred of Yiddishkeit, was instrumental in finding the rest of our minyan for us.

In honor of Purim, we hosted a festive celebration, complete with hamantashen, megillah readings, costumes, and dancing. Everyone in the community was invited, and I happily greeted Naya* and her son, Benny*, who'd moved to Salzburg a year or two before.

I circulated the tables throughout the event, chatting with each guest. When I sat down beside Benny and his mother, we began talking about work and school.

"So what grade are you in, Benny?" I asked. "5th?"

"I'm in *seventh* grade," he answered.

"Wait," I frowned, doing some quick mental math. "I thought you were 11. How old are you?"

"He recently turned 13," Naya beamed.

"Wow!" I responded. "So how was your bar mitzvah party?"

Both their faces fell.

"We had a whole event planned in Israel, in October," Naya explained. "Obviously, we had to cancel everything..."

"Do you have tefillin?" I asked.

"No," Naya admitted. "We wanted to get some in Israel, but unfortunately, that was part of our canceled plans."

"Well, we have all we need right here," I said, gesturing around me. "We have a party, we have a bar mitzvah boy, and I have my tefillin. We've got the makings for an awesome celebration! What do you say, Benny? Want to wrap tefillin for the first time, right now?"

Benny was excited, and rolled up his sleeve, allowing me to carefully place the tefillin on his left arm. He repeated Shema after me, word by word, the black straps swaying as he prayed. Naya sobbed as she watched her little boy take his rightful place in Jewish adulthood.

Salzburg is ringed by the snowy Alps, and the ski resorts draw thousands of visitors every year. Unfortunately, the sport can



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be dangerous, and it's not uncommon for Salzburg hospitals to receive ski accident victims via airlift.

One morning, I got a call from a woman who couldn't stop crying as she tried to speak. Eventually, I pieced together that her husband had a heart attack while skiing down the mountain, and, in addition to the cardiac emergency, had also suffered grave injuries. The entire family had come from Israel for a ski vacation, and now they were all huddled in his hospital room, worrying about his future. She asked if we could provide them with kosher food for Shabbos.

"Of course," I answered. "I'd be happy to do anything I can. You and your entire family are invited for Shabbos."

She thanked me, and promised to come.

The meal had a very heavy atmosphere. Everyone was still very worried about their father, whose condition was uncertain. Their brows remained furrowed, and their eyes downcast. We tried our best to comfort them with a healing, relaxing Shabbos.

When they left after havdalah, the mother pulled me aside and thanked me with tears in her eyes.

"This was a very difficult week for my family. Thank you for being such a bright spot in an otherwise dark time."

When we first considered moving to Austria, I was often asked why we didn't just stay in Israel, where we'd lived for a year after the wedding, and find a shlichus there.

Since we've moved, I've experienced a very interesting phenomenon. Many Israeli tourists celebrate their first Shabbos with us. We had an Israeli guest last year who heard megillah, for the first time in his life, in our Chabad house. I've put first-time tefillin on many individuals who I have no doubt were approached by shluchim in Israel, many times before.

In Israel, unfortunately, shluchim are often seen as part of the "dosim," the black-hatted crew they've been taught to despise. In Austria, however, I'm a fellow Jew who reminds them of home. They're so much more open to learning about Torah and mitzvos in Salzburg than they would be back home in Israel.

We moved at the beginning of the busy Tishrei season. When we started searching for a property for our Chabad house, we knew that not only would it have to be big enough to host Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur davening, it would also need a backyard for a sukkah. Salzburg is a beautiful city, filled with stunning architecture, but buildings rarely include a backyard. With these specifications in mind - let alone finding a prime, central location - we were worried the rent would be thousands of euros more than we could afford.

Through Hashem's miracles and the Rebbe's brachos, we found the perfect solution. An advertising business was renting their office space for very cheap because they wanted to use the large storefront windows to place their own advertisements. Despite being located on one of the main streets in Salzburg, they knew they would have a hard time finding renters who wouldn't mind losing use of their windows!

We were very happy to take them up on their offer. The covered windows provide extra security for our shul, and, best of all, the building includes a backyard perfect for a sukkah!

A shliach's job description is varied and all-inclusive. At times, he is a rabbi, lecturer, teacher, marriage counselor, chef, designer, therapist, youth director, and more.

One time, I ordered a taxi to take me back home. I was loaded down with grocery bags, mail packages, and some other bulky items that I had to awkwardly maneuver into the small car's trunk.

The taxi driver stared at me and my many packages in surprise.

"What do you do?" he asked, as we drove off.

"I'm a rabbi," I answered.

"I've never met a rabbi before, and I don't know exactly what that is. But, based on this meeting, I can only assume that a rabbi is a schlepper. I get it. I am the *rabbi* of my family too. I'm always dragging things around for everyone, from one place to another!"

One of the walls in our Chabad house was looking a little dingy. A fresh coat of paint would definitely brighten the space, but we debated whether or not it was worthwhile to find a painter now, or to wait until we had a bigger job to give him.

In the end, we asked a friend if he knew any painters, and he recommended his good friend, Misha*, who'd fled the war in Ukraine and settled in Salzburg.

Since my wife grew up on shlichus in Moscow, she was able to talk with Misha in Russian, the only language he understood. She found out that Misha had been a doctor back at home, but the upheaval had forced him to take any job available to him. She continued asking about his home and background, and soon asked the inevitable question - *Are you Jewish?*

"Yes," he replied.

As I wrapped tefillin around his arm, I realized the true reason why Misha was in our Chabad house. It wasn't because of the unpainted wall, but because his neshama needed to connect.

"I don't really understand all the ins and outs of these tefillin," Misha shared with us. "All I know is that my entire body was shaking and trembling while they were on me."

We knew that the Pesach seder would draw a large crowd, so we started calling every hotel in the city, trying to book one of their rooms. As soon as they heard that we'd have to kasher the kitchen and bring in kosher food, they refused.

"We don't allow outside food," they all explained. "We're very sorry."

With no other option, we hosted the seder in our modest dining room. It had been a last-ditch effort, but we knew we couldn't do that again.

The next year, we started calling all the same hotels again, with the same question. They all answered the same as the year before.

I wrote a letter to the Rebbe, asking for a bracha to find a place and help us fulfill his shlichus.

I was listening to one hotel receptionist apologize and refuse, when my wife whispered, "Ask them *why*."

I figured there was nothing to lose, so I asked. She stammered something about policy, but ultimately admitted that she didn't *know* the reason.

"Can you ask your manager?" I asked. She promised to do so.

Two minutes later, I got a phone call. It was the manager. Things changed very quickly. "I used to work in the U.S. and catered many Jewish weddings!" he told me. "I'm a friend of Israel and will do whatever I can to help. Of course you can hold the seder here! Let's figure this out!"

Baruch Hashem, we had a wonderful seder there!

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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