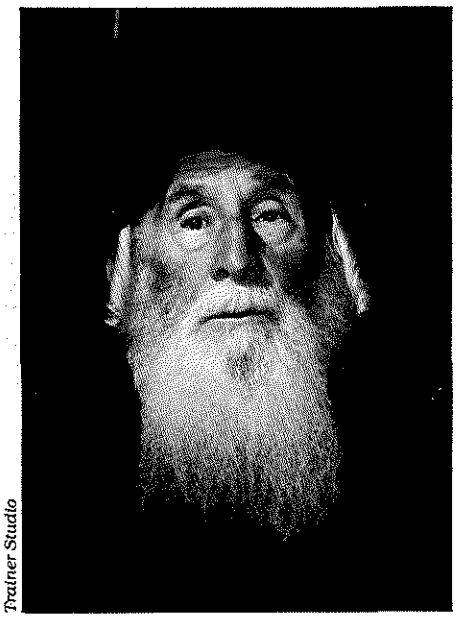
The Bluzhever *Rebbe*

זכר צדיק לברכה

5650/1889—5750/1989

A Biographical Appreciation



Trainer Studio

"When I entered this hall, I considered reciting the '*Shehechiyanu*' blessing, to thank *Hashem* for having permitted me to live to this great day. For I had the privilege of being present at the first *Knessia Gedolah* [in 1923] of Agudath Israel when the world-renowned *gaon*, the Lubliner *Rav* Rabbi Meir Shapiro, presented his plan of the study of *Daf Yomi*. . . . The tumultuous excitement with which the *gaonim* and *tzaddikim* of that time reacted to his wondrous proposal still rings in my ears. . . . It was an awesome sight.

"Also ringing in my ears, however, are the cries and screams of the 6,000,000 holy martyrs who were cast into the flames during the Second World War. . . . Thus, my joy at this occasion is tempered by the pain which those memories evoke. Therefore, I cannot recite a '*Shehechiyanu*.' But I can offer praise and gratitude to the *Ribbono shel Olam* that I have merited to be here today and witness this sight with my own eyes.

חסדי השם כי לא תמנו
כי לא כלו רחמיו ממני

"Hashem's kindness has not ended, nor has His compassion for my sake been exhausted."

With these words, Rabbi Yisroel Spira, the Bluzhever *Rebbe*, opened his address at the seventh *Daf Yomi Siyum HaShas* in 1975. He was then eighty-five years old, still a very active personality on the Torah scene and a powerful speaker. While he expressed his gratitude for having lived to that day, many who were present may well have offered their own silent thanks for being permitted to sit in the company of this *gaon* and *tzaddik*, a legend in his time and a living remnant of times that were long gone.

The Bluzhever *Rebbe* is widely known for his heroism during the Holocaust, and for the spiritual courage with which he infused others during those harrowing days. This, however, is only one aspect of his life story, which spanned a century; he was *Rav* of the city of Prochnik before the First World War, and a prominent Chassidic leader in Galicia before the Second World War. Then, after enduring unspeakable suffering during the Holocaust, he arrived on these shores to build anew and become one of the most active, influential, and beloved Torah leaders in America. Wherever he went, scores sought the *Rebbe*'s personal counsel and blessings, which he imparted with warmth, sensitivity and astuteness. To do his memory adequate justice is an impossible task. At best, we can attempt to trace the steps of his century-long life, and offer vignettes illustrating his sublime qualities.

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Rabbi Mordechai Leiner

The Rebbe's grandfather, the Zvi LaTzaddik

The Rebbe's father, the Keren Yeshua

I
Link in a Golden Chain

Bluzhev has its roots in the Chassidic dynasty that began with Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, the *Bnei Yissos'cher*. The Bluzhever *Rebbe* was a fifth generation, *ben achar ben* (direct paternal descendant) of the *Bnei Yissos'cher*.

The *Rebbe*'s father, Reb Yehoshua, was *Rav* of Ribitiche and was renowned both for his piety and Torah scholarship, evident in his *Keren Yeshua*, which was published posthumously. Even before his own father's passing in 1924, Reb Yehoshua had won a large following who sought his guidance and hearkened to his every word.

His son, Yisroel, was born in the early part of MarCheshvan 5650* (1899) in Bluzhev, Galicia. He was named Yisroel after the Baal Shem Tov, from whom his mother descended, and after Rabbi Yisroel of Rizhin, whose *Yahrtzeit* is on 3 *MarCheshvan*. Upon seeing him for the first time, the *Rebbe*'s grandfather is said to have remarked, "I'm certain that the Baal Shem Tov had such a countenance."

While the *Keren Yeshua* served as "Srulche's" primary teacher of Torah, it was not from him that his son received most of his *hadracha* (guidance). The *Keren Yeshua* would travel frequently to Bluzhev, to be with his own father, Reb Tzvi Elimelech, known by his work, *Tzvi LaTzaddik*, the first Bluzhever *Rebbe*. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* was a towering personality, a giant of *Chassidus* and a *gaon* to whom would come halachic queries from across Galicia and beyond.

The *Keren Yeshua* would take his son along whenever he traveled to Bluzhev, where he became the apple of his grandfather's eye. When he reached maturity, Yisroel lived primarily with his grandfather. In later years, whenever the Bluzhever *Rebbe* mentioned the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*, he was moved to tears. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* invested much time and energy in his grandson's rearing, recognizing the boy's reputation as an *illuy* (genius) while still in his youth.

*There is uncertainty as to the exact date of birth.

WALKING HUMBLY

The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* placed great emphasis on the attribute of *hatzne'a leches*, walking humbly with *Hashem*, in a manner that conceals one's spiritual strivings and accomplishments. The Bluzhever *Rebbe* related, among a number of such instances, how at his grandfather's *Shabbos* table, the *Rebbe** said, "*Lekavod Shabbos Kodesh* (In honor of the holy *Shabbos*)" before partaking of his food, a practice that he had learned from his own father-in-law. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik*, who had been deeply engrossed in his own thoughts, looked up and said, "It is enough that one thinks to himself that he is eating for the honor of *Shabbos*. It is unnecessary to announce this for others."

*Every mention of "the *Rebbe*" in the text is a reference to Rabbi Yisroel Spira.

As for the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*'s own *hatzne'a leches* and *dveikus* (Heavenly attachment), the *Rebbe* would relate the following incident:

The highlight of the Bluzhever Friday night *tisch* was the singing of *Ko Ribbon* to a stirring tune that originated with the *Bnei Yissos'cher*.* The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* sang this tune each week at his *tisch*, which he conducted every week except *Parshios Bereishis* and *Noach*.** One year, on *Parshas Noach*, young Srulche and a friend desperately wanted to see how the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* experienced the *Shabbos* in the privacy of his study. They convinced the *gabbai* to leave the study door slightly ajar, so that they could watch undetected.

On the table, the *Shabbos* candles flickered. From the ceiling hung a burning oil lamp. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* stood near the fireplace, swaying to and fro with his eyes shut tight, as he sang *Ko Ribbon* unlike any the two boys had ever heard. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* interspersed *Yiddish* words among the Hebrew phrases of the song:

למקדשך תוב: וואס שאט עס דיר אז
עס וועט שוין זיין למקדשך תוב?

To Your sanctuary return: What loss could You possibly suffer from returning to Your sanctuary once again?

ולקדש קודשין: וען וועט עס נאך אמאל
זיין ולקדש קודשין?

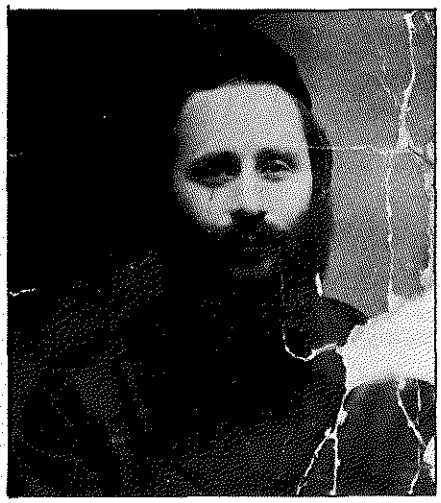
When will it once again be *To Your holy of holies*?

אין וואס וועט דארט זיין?

And what will transpire there?

*The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* would say that one who hears this *nigun* will not sin. The resulting spiritual uplift would remove the very desire to sin from a person's heart.

** The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* would say that the *Shabbos* on which the Torah reading tells of the world's creation is too awesome to conduct a *tisch*. As for *Parshas Noach*, "How can one conduct a *tisch* on the week when we read the world was inundated by the Flood?"



The Rebbe, in his youth

ויזמרין לך שירין ורחשין.
They will sing to You songs and praises,
אין וואו ווען עס זייך?
And where will this transpire?
בירושלים קרתא דשופריא.
In Jerusalem, city of beauty.

A noise at the door shook the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* from his rapture. At first, he scolded the boys for being where they should not have been. Then his features softened and he said: "Did you see how the *lechtelech* (candles) danced and jumped, shouting '*Shabbos Kodesh!*'? Did you notice how even the oil lamps danced and jumped: '*Shabbos Kodesh!*'?

"Is anyone going to try and convince me that *Shabbos* is but *me'en*—a semblance-of the World-to-Come? I assure you that I wish on myself no better than that which I am experiencing at this very moment."

MARRIAGE

At age sixteen, the *Rebbe* received *semicha* (rabbinic ordination) from Rabbi Meir Arik of Tarnow, a renowned Torah figure of his time. That same year, the *Rebbe* married the daughter of Rabbi Shalom David Ungar, the Szabne *Rav*. For the initial three years of his marriage, the *Rebbe* was engaged in the full-time study of Torah while he lived in the home of his father-in-law, a *tzaddik* and *gaon* of great renown.

Yisroel's *aufruf* was held in Bluzhev. That *Shabbos* morning, the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* held his grandson's new *shtreimel* in his hand and said, "Srulche, do you know what it means to be a *chassan*? Let me explain with a *mashal*:

"There was once a king who was served faithfully for many years by his loyal servant. When the servant grew old, he said to himself, 'Soon I will depart this world. Who will serve the king in my stead, faithfully fulfilling his every desire? I must now train a young man who will fill my role when I am gone.'

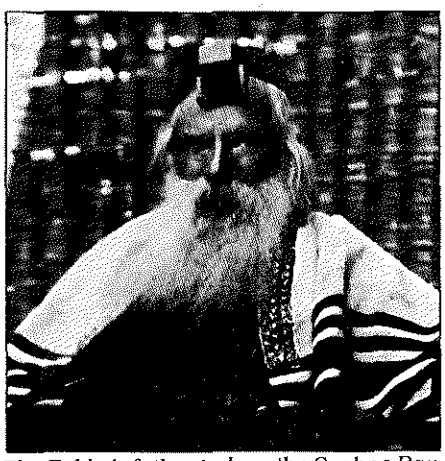
"That," said the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*, "is what a *chassan* is. As time goes on, one approaches the day when he will have to depart this world. It is therefore imperative that before that time arrives, there be someone ready to carry on the ways and traditions of the old generation, to serve the King faithfully in his stead."

With those words, the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* placed the *shtreimel* upon his grandson's head for the first time, as both grandfather and grandson wept.*

PROCHNIKER *RAV*

In the year 5669 (1909), the *Rebbe*, then all of nineteen years, was invited to serve as *Rav* of Prochnik, a Galician city among whose inhabitants were many Bluzhever *Chassidim*. While his own city accorded him a respect unusual for someone his age and his name became known in an ever-widening circle, the *Rebbe* would be away from Prochnik for great lengths of time as he served faithfully at his grandfather's side. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* had an apartment set aside for his grandson, whom he would consult on a variety of issues.

*Before he passed away, the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* requested of his grandson that he undertake the posthumous publication of his halachic responsa. After the *Keren Yeshua* died, a *gorel* (lottery) was cast to decide who would inherit the manuscripts of both the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* and *Keren Yeshua*. The *gorel* fulfilled the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*'s desire, as it assigned his responsa to the *Rebbe*. In publishing the work, the *Rebbe* included his own footnotes, which provide a glimpse of the *Rebbe*'s wide-ranging breadth and depth of Talmudic knowledge.



Rabbi Mordechai Leiner

The Rebbe's father-in-law, the Szabne Rav

Through his close association with his grandfather, the *Rebbe* was introduced to many Torah leaders of Galicia and Poland; others he met on his own. In later years, he remarked how he had striven, with great success, to meet the many *gedolim* that graced Eastern Europe in the first half of this century.

The *Rebbe* was quickly recognized as a light for the coming generation. The *Imrei Emes*, Rabbi Avrohom Mordechai Alter, referred to him as "*a kluger Yid* (wise Jew)." As the years rolled on, the Prochniker *Rav* became one of the most distinguished personages in Galicia. In fact, when the Munkazcer *Rebbe* (author of *Minchas Elazar*) married off a child, he honored the *Rebbe*, then still in Prochnik, with reciting a blessing at the *chupa* of his child.*

In 1924 (5784), the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* passed away in the city of Reisha, to be succeeded by his son, the *Keren Yeshua*. From then on, the *Rebbe* would leave Prochnik to be near his father, whose own sublime stature then came into full view.

A mere eight years later, in winter 5932 (1932), the *Keren Yeshua* fell deathly ill. One day, he told his son, "It bothers me very much that people will have to return from the cemetery on an *Erev Shabbos* in a raging storm." He passed away

*The *Rebbe* was unable to accept the honor. He had seated himself at the back of the huge crowd and was unable to squeeze through to where the *chassan* and *kalla* stood.

shortly thereafter, on an *Erev Shabbos*, and the funeral took place in the midst of a blizzard.

RELUCTANT *REBBE*

The *Rebbe* was born to the *Keren Yeshua* from a second marriage, after his first *Rebbetzin* had died. One son from the *Keren Yeshua*'s first marriage was a man of great stature. The *Keren Yeshua* wrote in his will, however, that Reb Yisroel should succeed him as *Rebbe*. Humility and pursuit of peace were the *Rebbe*'s hallmarks, and he found it exceedingly difficult to honor his father's wishes, in deference to his older brother. On the first Friday night following the *Keren Yeshua*'s passing, hundreds flocked to the *Keren Yeshua*'s *beis midrash* in Reisha to be near the new *Rebbe*. The *Rebbe*, however, wanted no part of it, and he recited the *tefillos* and partook of *Kiddush* like any other *Chassid*. After *Shabbos*, he called a meeting at which were present his brothers and the elder *Chassidim* of Bluzhev. It was unanimous that the *Keren Yeshua*'s wish be heeded and that the Prochniker *Rav* become *Rebbe*. The *Rebbe* put forth his own suggestion that he become *Rebbe*, but in a different city, while his older brother would serve as *av beis din* in Bluzhev, and their father's *beis midrash* in Reisha would function on its own.* At the invitation of the *Rav* of Istrik, the *Rebbe* took up residence there.

Chazal (Rabbis of the Talmud) state that he who flees from honor will be pursued by honor. The *Rebbe*'s conduct at that time earned him yet greater admiration and respect. On his first *Shabbos* in Istrik, scores of *Chassidim* traveled from far to be with him. The *Tzvi LaTzaddik* had enjoyed a following not only in Galicia, but also in Hungary, where he had resided during the First World War. In due time, the *Rebbe*'s following included the wide spectrum of *Chassidim* that had flocked to his grandfather and father. And like his ancestors, his vast Torah knowledge earned him the reverence of the non-Chassidic Torah world, as well.

The *Rebbe* was very active in *klal* work during his days in Europe. He was a member of Agudath Israel of Galicia, and as already mentioned, attended the first *Knessia Gedolah* in 1923. During his early years in America, the *Rebbe* told his congregants that when attending that *Knessia Gedolah*, he was privileged to speak privately with the Chofetz Chaim. In the course of their discussion, the Chofetz Chaim cited the testimony of *Kol Bo* that many *battei knessios* were destroyed because of the sin of speaking during davening.* At that time, the *Rebbe* resolved that in his own *kehilla* there would be proper awe for *kedushas beis haknesses*.

Throughout his fifty-seven years as *Rebbe*, he stood by that resolution steadfastly. Once, when there was persistent talking during the *Torah* reading, the *Rebbe* firmly declared, "I am not in need of a large *minyan*. If some insist on talking, then I will gather ten people and *daven* upstairs [in my apartment]." On another occasion, he actually took his *Siddur* and went upstairs, where he completed his *davening* alone.

*A younger brother of the *Rebbe* served in his father's former position as *rav* in Ribitiche.

*See *Mishna Berurah*, *Orach Chaim* 124:27

II.
Days of Darkness Source of Light

"THE WORLD STILL NEEDS YOU!"

The *Rebbe*'s five years under Nazi occupation are a saga of tragedy, incredible suffering, salvation and faith. The *Rebbe*'s first *Rebbetzin* had borne him three daughters. Two died before the war. His remaining daughter was married to Rabbi Shaul Rappaport, a distinguished *talmid chacham* whom the *Rebbe* had chosen as a son-in-law upon the suggestion of the then-Gerrer *Rebbe*, Rabbi Avrohom Mordechai Alter זצ"ל. At the outbreak of the War, the *Rebbe* and his family fled from Istrik to Lemberg. There, his daughter, son-in-law and only grandchild were killed. The *Rebbe* and his *Rebbetzin* were taken from Lemberg to the Belzec death camp. The selection began, whereby able-bodied men were set aside from the others, who were to meet their end shortly thereafter.

As his eyes scanned the terrified group, the officer in charge called out, "Which men here are under fifty?"

Realizing that these men were to be spared, the *Rebbe*'s wife called out, "My husband is forty-five!"

But the *Rebbe* did not want to be separated from his *Rebbetzin*. "No!" he pleaded to the Nazi, "you don't want me, I'm actually fifty-two," which was the truth. The Nazi believed the *Rebbetzin*. As the *Rebbe* was being dragged away, his *Rebbetzin* called out, "The world still needs you. May this knowledge give you strength." She met her death a short while later, while the Rebbe was sent to the Janowska concentration camp near Lemberg.

The guiding hand of Providence was plainly apparent throughout that period, as the *Rebbe*'s life was miraculously spared time and again. In Janowska, the *Rebbe* was sentenced to hanging along with two others, for allegedly "conspiring" with a prisoner who had shouted an anti-German cry and then killed himself. As they stood near the gallows awaiting the end, an officer suddenly appeared and ordered the hangman to release the prisoners for one hour so that they could bury

some corpses. They were warned, "When your work is finished, run back here as fast as you can."

The three men finished their work. Their superior ordered them to return to the gallows and disappeared. The *Rebbe* demanded, "Why hurry? Need we run to our deaths? Let us enter a barracks and hide among the prisoners. We have nothing to lose."

One of the other men was oblivious to everything and ran to his death. The *Rebbe* and his remaining companion hurried to the nearest barracks. "*Rattevet uns, Yidden*! Save us, fellow Jews!" the *Rebbe* pleaded. The prisoners were understandably terrified. Seeing their reluctance, the *Rebbe* said, "I am the Prochniker *Rav*, from the House of Bluzhev."

The prisoners said that they were willing to take a risk for the sake of such a personage. The *Rebbe* added, "I will not accept your offer unless you hide my friend, as well," and with those words he moved toward the door. Both men were hidden, and with the aid of a *Kapo*, were attached to a new working brigade, given new numbers, and not discovered.

EPITOME OF FAITH

As reputable Holocaust historians have noted, the Nazis were out to do more than exterminate Jews. The Jews had to be humiliated, dehumanized, stripped of their dignity and pride to discredit the philosophy of life they represented.

In discussing the Holocaust, the Bluzhever *Rebbe* would make this same point. He would add that throughout his years of Nazi persecution, he always strove to maintain his pride and dignity, both as a Jew and as a human being. . . . With the little water that was allotted the camp inmates for their personal needs, the *Rebbe* would launder his drab uniform to keep his appearance as respectable as possible. . . . The *Rebbe*'s beard was burnt off with a lit candle placed beneath his chin. As his beard melted away, the *Rebbe* stood erect, refusing to beg for mercy. Frustrated, the Nazi slapped the *Rebbe*: "*Shwein*! Doesn't it hurt? Why don't you scream?!"

Still, the *Rebbe* remained silent.

"THANK YOU . . . FOR KEEPING US ALIVE"

In Bergen-Belsen, where he spent the latter part of the War, the *Rebbe* was spiritual leader of his fellow prisoners. In preparation for Chanuka, shoe dye that could serve as fuel was smuggled out of the camp factory by women inmates. Threads were pulled from sweaters by the women and spun into wicks. On the first night of Chanuka, the *Rebbe* led a secret *Ma'ariv minyan*. Scores of Jews, risking discovery, then joined together for the kindling of the Chanuka *lecht*. The *Rebbe* recited the three blessings and lit the *menora*.

A non-believing former Polish-Bundist leader asked the *Rebbe*, "Rabbi Spira, I do not understand how you can bring yourself to recite the *Shehechiyanu* blessing: 'Blessed are You *Hashem* . . . Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.' How can you offer thanks for having been kept alive for this time of death, torture, and hunger? Haven't you made a mockery of our suffering?"

The *Rebbe* replied, "I, too, was wondering how I could joyfully recite these words. But then I looked around and I saw this huge assemblage of Jews that had gathered to participate in this *mitzva*. Despite the terrible suffering, they insist on remaining Jews, even at the risk of their lives. Have you ever in your life witnessed such courage and faith? For that alone we thank the Creator for life to witness the greatness of our people. No! We Jews do not give up. We are proud that we have lived to see thousands of Jews who have not given up, who will never give up, and who are living proof that we will one day rebuild anew."

Years later on a visit to Poland, an acquaintance of the *Rebbe*, Reb Nechemia Frankel, met this Bundist leader, who said, "Tell Rabbi Spira that he saved my life. He will understand."

Rabbi Spira, how can you bring yourself to recite the Shehechiyanu blessing? How can you offer thanks for having been kept alive for this time of death, torture, and hunger. Haven't you made a mockery of our suffering?

TO HONOR THE "KEDOSHIM"

Upon the Bluzhever *Rebbe*'s suggestion, the 1975 *Siyum Hashas* was dedicated to the memory of the Six Million. In the course of his impassioned address, the *Rebbe* remarked, "I can bear witness that rarely did I hear a Jew question the will of the Almighty, despite the most unspeakable sufferings. All accepted their suffering with true love of G-d. Their only concern—and this I heard many times—was that no one would recite *Kaddish* in their memories, or learn a chapter of *Mishnayos* for the sake of their souls."

The *Rebbe* then read a letter that he had received while in the Janowska death camp from a man about to be taken to be shot. The man requested that in the event the *Rebbe* survive the war, he should have a *sefer Torah* written in memory of the man and his wife, who had already perished. Along with the letter was a fifty-dollar bill, toward the cost of writing the Torah scroll.*

The *Rebbe* continued that there is no greater way to honor the *kedoshim* than by studying Torah in their memory. He put forth a request that all *yeshivos* dedicate one hour of study each week in

*Shortly after coming to America, the *Rebbe* had the *sefer Torah* written, and presented it to Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

memory of the Six Million. This would benefit both the dead and the living, for through such study the students would be reminded that a *churban* did indeed take place not long ago, and would be told about the great spiritual heroism of these martyrs. Otherwise, said the *Rebbe*, as time went on, the *churban* of World War II would become little more than another tragic historical occurrence.

STARTING ANEW

When Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British in 1945, the *Rebbe* was transferred to a D.P. camp in Brussels. Meanwhile, his relatives in America, as well as those who had ties to the Bluzhever *Chassidus*, had discovered that he was alive and sought to have him brought to these shores. Mr. Menashe Ringler, of the legendary *Nein un Neintziger Shtiebel* on East Side Manhattan's Houston Street, alerted Reb Elimelech Tress, President of Zeirei Agudath Israel, to the special nature of this self-effacing refugee. He arranged passage for him by military ship to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1946. From there he traveled to New York, where he took temporary residence with his sister, *Rebbetzin* Chana Halberstam.*

As word of the *Rebbe*'s arrival spread, he was virtually besieged: Chassidic Jews of all stripes were anxious to visit the first *Rebbe* to have survived the camps and make his way to America. Those whose relatives had been in Bergen-Belsen were anxious to speak with a survivor. Galician Jews saw in him a link to their past. As is customary when petitioning a *Rebbe*, a sum of money was appended to each *kvittel* that the *Rebbe* received. Tremendous sums passed through the *Rebbe*'s hands during his first weeks in New York. He sent every penny abroad to help the Holocaust survivors.

*She was the wife of Rabbi Yitzchok Halberstam, the Bardeyov *Rav*. Another sister, *Rebbetzin* Chaya Horowitz, wife of the late Stuchiner *Rebbe* ע"ה, is the *Rebbe*'s only surviving sibling.

The Rebbe at a meeting of Agudath Israel activists, during siege of Jerusalem in 1948. To the left, Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein.

It would be a full year before the *Rebbe* would begin leading his people once again as *rav* of his own *minyan*. He needed time to gather his inner strength and recover from the horrors that he had endured. On Purim of that year, the *minyan* where the *Rebbe davened* honored him with reading the *Megilla*. The *Rebbe* began to read, but broke down and cried. He could not continue. He later said that reading the *Megilla* had awakened memories of his reading the *Megilla* in the camps. He never again read the *Megilla*.

A number of individuals with roots in Bluzhev asked that the *Rebbe* permit them to look for a building in Williamsburg that would serve as the home of the new Bluzhever *Beis Midrash*, under the *Rebbe*'s leadership. But the *Rebbe* had decided against assuming a role as *manhig* (spiritual leader) in America. He was approaching sixty, and after all he had been through, he felt unable to lead a *kehilla*. He intended to learn a trade to support himself.

However, his petitioners would not relent. They saw in him more than a continuation of the dynasty begun by the *Bnei Yissos'cher*. They were familiar with his sterling personality, his brilliance in both Torah and practical matters, and his leadership qualities. One aged man, Reb Avrohom Geiger, had served as *gabbai* for the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*. He felt, as did others, that many of the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*'s sublime qualities were reflected in his grandson. They desperately wanted him to lead them. So the *Rebbe* finally agreed to serve in that capacity once again.

The *Rebbe* had been referred to as the Prochniker *Rav* until his last days in Europe, indicating the recognition he had earned even before succeeding his father as *Rebbe*. As his followers in America laid the groundwork for his new *beis midrash*, they requested that he call himself Bluzhever *Rebbe*, as a continuity of the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*'s dynasty. The *Rebbe*, at first, would not hear of this: He had never been *Rebbe* in Bluzhev. Nor did he see himself fit to be a successor to the *Tzvi LaTzaddik*. Then, someone informed the *Rebbe* that a distinguished *rav* in New York, whose roots were in Prochnik, was called "Prochniker *Rav*." To avoid discomfort to the other *rav*, the *Rebbe* abandoned his plan.

The *Rebbe* telephoned Reb Leib Wertenteil, a *Chassid* of the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* who had been among the most adamant that the *Rebbe* assume his grandfather's title. "Reb Leib," he said, "you have accomplished a *mofes* (a wonder)." And so

it was that he became known as the Bluzhever *Rebbe*.

Another *Chassid*, Reb Yissos'cher Tisser, arranged for the purchase of a building on Taylor Street in Williamsburg to serve as the *Rebbe*'s home and *beis midrash*.* Reb Elimelech Tress arranged to dispatch a *sefer Torah*, along with a dozen *Siddurim* and *Chumashim*, from the Zeirei *minyan* at 616 Bedford Avenue. The Bluzhever *Rebbe* remarked that the *Siddurim* were more than enough for his projected *minyan*. In a short time, another fifty had to be procured.

One year after his arrival, on *Parashas Ki Seitzei*, the *Rebbe* began leading his own *beis midrash*. It was ironic, or perhaps intentional, that in his discourse that week, the *Rebbe* mentioned that the word מעקה, fence, which is found in *Ki Seitzei* (*Devarim* 22,8), contains the initials of קבלת עול מלכות השם, "Acceptance of the yoke of Hashem's reign," for it was this unflinching acceptance that had given the *Rebbe* the fortitude to survive, and to carry on and build anew.

ON THE AMERICAN SCENE

Once the *Rebbe* settled in Williamsburg, he became active in *Klal* work. He served as member of *Agudas haAdmorim*, an organization of *Chassidic Rebbeim*; *Va'ad Ezra*, a *hatzalah* organization whose primary function was to assist *Rebbeim* who had been uprooted during the War to reestablish their *kehillos*; and Agudath Israel.

Reb Elimelech Tress became very close with the *Rebbe*. In the years immediately following the War, Mr. Tress saw the need to expand Agudath Israel of America's efforts in a variety of areas and to alter its course to some extent, so he turned to the *Rebbe* for guidance and support, and received both wholeheartedly. The *Rebbe* was to remain a very active member of the Agudah's Presidium and later its *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* (Council of Torah Sages). Indicative of both his sense of responsibility as a Torah leader and his recognition of Agudath Israel's crucial role in the Torah scene in this country, is his retention of his seat on the organization's Presidium even after he had been appointed to the *Moetzes*.

*In 1959, the *Rebbe* moved to Boro Park, where he lived until his passing.

At a convention of Agudath Israel of America, in Lakewood, N.J., close to 30 years ago. To the left: Novominsker Rebbe, Boyaner Rebbe, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, Rabbi Aaron Kotler, Rabbi Eliezer Silver, זכרונם לברכה.

During his early years in America, much remained to be done for war survivors, especially those still in D.P. Camps and others who had as yet been unable to begin life anew. As a concentration camp survivor, the *Rebbe* felt a heightened degree of responsibility to participate in these rescue efforts.

With the passing years, changing times brought new crises and challenges, and the *Rebbe* was involved in high-level policy-making by the Torah leadership. He was in constant contact with Agudath Israel and developed a very close relationship with the current president, Rabbi Moshe Sherer. He rarely missed a meeting of the *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah*, and often was the impetus behind meetings being called. He was rarely late for any occasion, for he felt punctuality to be an obligation for anyone whose activities were of substance; and he let this be known whenever he felt it appropriate.*

Rabbi Yehudah Meir Abramowitz, former Knesset member and current Co-Chairman of the World Agudah Organization, recalls vividly the *Rebbe*'s intense involvement in the Agudah's activities and his deep recognition of the vital role it plays. When Rabbi Abramowitz came to America in 1952 because of a crisis in *Eretz Yisroel*, he often found himself turning to the *Rebbe* for guidance. This was the first time the two had met, but when Rabbi Abramowitz's trip extended to the *Yomim Noraim*, he was invited to spend Rosh Hashana with the *Rebbe*, who made his guest feel very much at home.

PERSONIFICATION OF WARMTH AND CONCERN

The *Rebbe* exuded a warmth that was both sincere and contagious. When making a point, he would frequently draw on hundreds of stories of events and people that to us are history but which were a real part of his long life. Moreover, he would penetrate to the heart of a problem. These factors contributed to the *Rebbe*'s effectiveness in *Klal* work and the enormous reverence which he enjoyed from all segments of the Torah community.

There was another factor as well. The *Mishna* (*Avos* 4:1) states: "Who is honored? He who honors others." This concern was manifest whenever the *Rebbe* found himself in the presence of other *gedolim*. Once,

*In this regard, he offered a homiletic interpretation of the verse, "He shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that issues from his mouth" (*Bamidbar* 30,3). He would say that a *Rebbe* is one whose blessings are often sought, in the hope that the blessings will prove effective. However, for one's blessings to have potency, meaning that He [*Hashem*] will act according to all that issues from his [the blesser's] mouth, it is incumbent that *he not break his word*. The *Rebbe* would say that keeping one's word applies also to being on time for one's appointments.

the *Rebbe* was visited by Rabbi Yeruchom Leiner, the late Radziner *Rebbe*, who was ill and had come to receive the Bluzhever *Rebbe*'s blessing. While they were talking, someone else entered the *Rebbe*'s study and presented a *kvittel* with the name of a sick relative. Without even glancing at the *kvittel*, the *Rebbe* handed it to the Radziner to read and comment on. Only then did the *Rebbe* accept it back to read.

He loved and pursued peace, and the sincere warmth that he felt toward every Jew of every shade and stripe was likewise felt and reflected by the other *gedolim* of his time. In his frequent contacts with Rabbi Sherer, he often expressed his deep concern that *shalom* reign within the ranks of Torah Jewry.

He was extremely close to the late *Rebbes* of Amshenov and Vizhnitz, as well as those of Kapishnitz, Boyan and Satmar, all of whom he would visit each year on *Chol Hamoed Succos*. He was equally at home with the leaders of the Lithuanian yeshiva world.

Rabbi Aharon Kotler once requested of the *Rebbe* that his *beis midrash* make an annual appeal on behalf of Beth Medrash Govoha. Reb Aharon told the *Rebbe*, "What is important to me is not the amount of money raised, but that the Bluzhever *Rebbe*'s *Beis Midrash* made an appeal on behalf of the Lakewood Yeshiva."

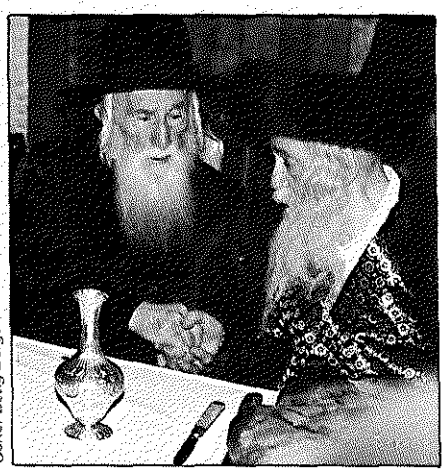
The *Rebbe* was especially close with Reb Yaakov Kamenetzky. In their later years, the two would spend time together during the winter when they left New York for warmer climate. When they would meet, their mutual delight was obvious.

The *Rebbe* had considered attending the last *Knessia Gedolah* in Jerusalem in 1980. However, his advanced age and weakening health forced him to not undertake the trip. Reb Yaakov, however, did attend the conclave. The first time the two met after the *Knessia*, Reb Yaakov told the *Rebbe*, "You were right in remaining at home, but I must tell you that your presence was sorely missed."

Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, late *Rosh Yeshiva* of Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, had his own special relationship with the *Rebbe*. Once, Rabbi Hutner phoned the *Rebbe* and asked that he sing for him his famous "*Ko Ribbon*." The *Rebbe* laughed and replied, "For this you will have to come to the *tisch*."

III.
A Father Again

In 1947, the *Rebbe* married the former Bronia Koczicki, who, with her two young sons, had been in Bergen-Belsen with the *Rebbe*. Her four-year-old, Yitzchok, was allotted a daily ration of milk; in keeping with German "propriety," the Nazis wanted young prisoners to have an "ample" supply of calcium. The *Rebbetzin* would set aside a portion of the milk for the *Rebbe*, which one of her sons would deliver. . . . She gave the *Rebbe* a *Tanach* she procured (see insert), which he used to study with her older son Tzvi (now the current



Osher Zelig Berger

Trainer Studio

The Rebbe with other Gedolei Yisroel (clockwise from top right): Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, Rabbi Shneur Kotler, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, זכרונם לברכה; Rabbi Gedalya Schorr, זצ"ל; the Klausenberger Rebbe, שליט"א.

Bluzhever *Rebbe*) and several other boys. The *Rebbetzin's* heroism during the war is legendary.

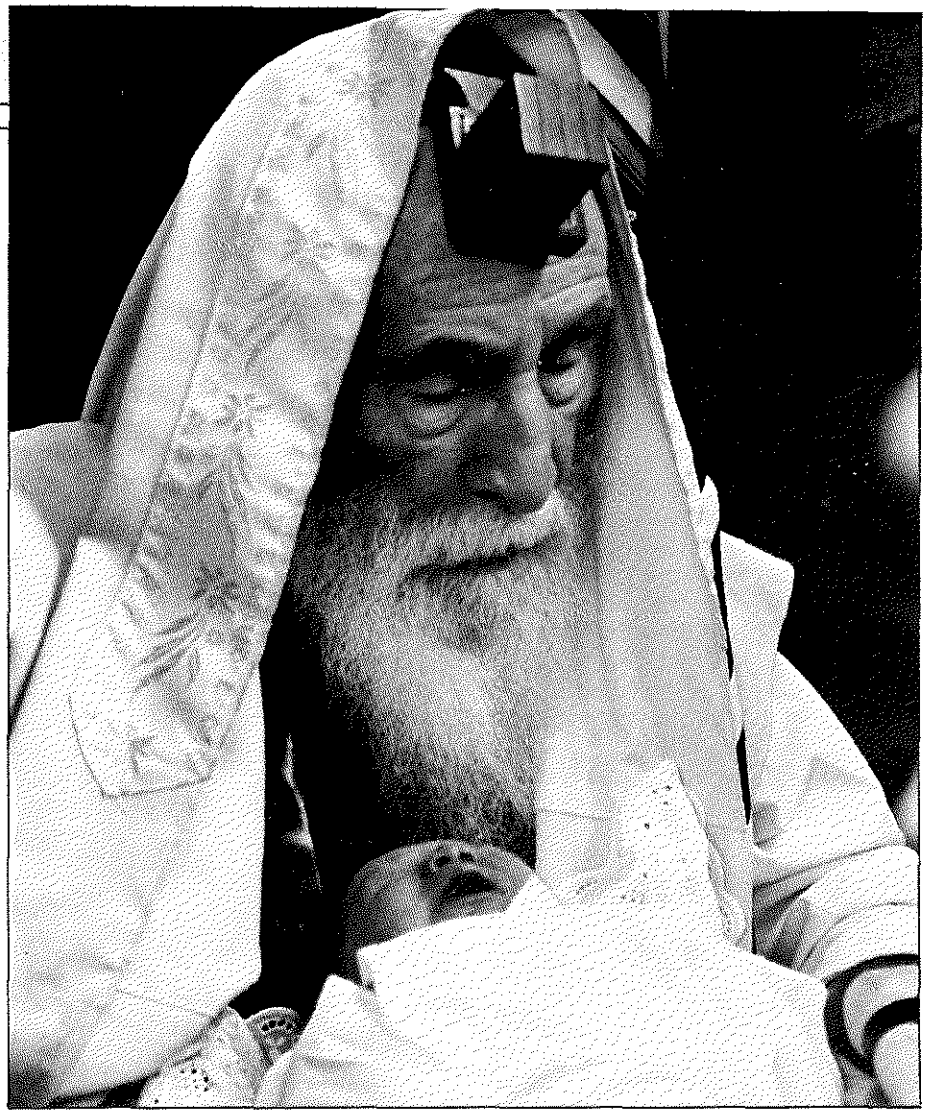
The closeness that had existed then between the *Rebbe* and his future sons was evident soon after liberation. The British had agreed to allow a boatload of war children to leave the D.P. camps for *Eretz Yisroel*. In addition to her two sons, the *Rebbetzin* had in her care twin nieces, whom she had saved at the risk of her own life. Uncertain of her own future, the *Rebbetzin* arranged for the four children to sail to *Eretz Yisroel*, where relatives would care for them until she would arrive.

Six-year-old Yitzchok was frightened, and on the day of departure, the boy grabbed the *Rebbe*'s hand as he sought protection from his own mother! After the situation was explained to him, the *Rebbe* calmed the boy and he left with the others.

When the *Rebbe* and *Rebbetzin* were married in New York, the *Rebbetzin*'s sons were still in *Eretz Yisroel*. Only after journeying to Canada and Washington was the *Rebbe* successful in obtaining visas.

An acquaintance of the *Rebbe* with two children of his own in *Eretz Yisroel* had failed in his attempts at obtaining visas for them. He asked the *Rebbe* to give him the newly acquired visas, explaining, "The *Rebbe* is an important figure and will probably be able to obtain a second set of visas for his wife's children. I might never succeed." The *Rebbe* surrendered the hard-earned visas to the petitioner. Months of intense efforts, aggravation, and expense would pass before the *Rebbetzin*'s sons could finally be brought to America.

The *Rebbe*'s sensitivities were perceived best by his family. One day, soon after the *Rebbe* had remarried, he went for a walk with his two sons. One of the boys noticed an ant and stepped on it. The *Rebbe* exclaimed, "Do you know what just happened? The ants had begun to dance; everyone was rejoicing as the wedding had begun. The bride was waiting—and then you came and stepped on the groom! What a tragedy!"



The *Rebbe* would never permit the children to discard food crumbs, but would scatter them outside for the birds.

His love for children was frequently in evidence, especially during his visits to the Agudath Israel camps of "Ruach Country."

THE HEIGHT OF ECSTASY

When the *Rebbe* was shipped off to the Janowska concentration camp early on in the war, the hand of Providence permitted him to escape the camp and return to nearby Lemberg, where he remained until his deportation to Bergen-Belsen. While in Lemberg, the *Rebbe* managed to obtain a South American passport for himself and a child. By that time, his daughter and grandchild had already been killed. When news of his passport became known, some forty parents brought their children to the *Rebbe*, begging that he save them. The *Rebbe* would not choose one child over the others, but asked the Judenrat to make the decision.

Two days later, a father and son appeared at the *Rebbe*'s door. The father kissed his son and said, "From this moment on, this man is your father." When the *Rebbe* was later deported to Bergen-Belsen, the boy went with him.

The child survived the war, and was eventually reunited with his own father shortly before the father's death. The son later married and settled in England. The *Rebbe* always maintained contact with him. On a visit to the *Rebbe* one year, this young man expressed the desire that G-d grant him a son to carry on his father's name. The *Rebbe* said, "You will have a son, and with *Hashem*'s help, I will be the *sandek*."

A year later a son was born. The

The Bluzhever Rebbe *was the paradigm Holocaust Survivor. Indeed, he taught by example to others the rudiments of spiritual survival during the war, as well as afterwards. Among the scores of anecdotes that have been collected on this theme, is the following, which was written by* **Rabbi Nosson Scherman,** *based on an interview with the* Rebbe *eleven years ago.*

FOR WHOM THE MATZOS?

It was two weeks before Pesach and there was no matzah. The Bluzhever *Rebbe* approached Commandant Hass of the Bergen-Belsen death camp, with an audacious request:

"We wish to celebrate our religious holiday by baking matzah. We do not ask for extra rations. All we ask is that we be given flour instead of bread and that we be permitted to build a small oven for ourselves. All the work will be done outside of our regular working hours."

The officer said that the request would be forwarded to Berlin. To the amazement of all, the answer was not to execute the "dogs" who dared ask, but to grant them the privilege.

During those busy pre-Pesach days, one of the women in the camp went into labor. She was taken to a nearby hospital to give birth. With her, someone smuggled out a letter addressed to Switzerland. The letter described the inhuman conditions in the camp and begged that some way be found to send food packages to prevent starvation. Ordinarily, patients going to hospitals were able to find ways to forward letters, but this one could not. The letter was discovered on her person and sent back to Commandant Hass. He was furious and he was determined to vent his rage on the Rabbiner for whom he had just done a favor.

"Rabbiner Spira, I was kind enough to let you bake your filthy matzos and then you repay me by sending out this ungrateful lying letter!"

The *Rebbe* answered calmly that he knew nothing of the letter and had no hand in dispatching it.

"But you are the Rabbiner. Either you know who sent it or you can find out. If you do not inform me within twenty-four hours who is responsible for this letter, I will have you shot."

The Bluzhever *Rebbe* answered, "I repeat that I know nothing of the letter. If I did know or if I find out who is responsible I will not tell you. The twenty-four hours are over—you can shoot me now."

Hass turned to leave. Why the notorious murderer did not add one more victim to his list, no one knows. With his jackboot, he smashed the matzah oven and went his way.

Matzos had been baked, however. Now the question was how they should be divided. The preponderant opinion was that they should be given to adults who were required by the Torah to eat matzah. Children had no such requirement and therefore should not be permitted to deplete the scarce supply of matzos. There was a stray voice raised in opposition, however—the voice of a woman.

In the camp was a widow [later, the *Rebbe's* second *Rebbetzin*] who cared for her two sons and two nieces throughout the war. She came from a distinguished family to which she personally added stature. "We must rebuild the Jewish people with our children," she argued. "They are precisely the ones who should receive portions of matzah for if we ever escape this *Mitzrayim* (Egypt), they are the future."

Responsibility for children was more than rhetoric to her. In the camp, she learned of someone who had a Bernfeld *Tanach* with German translation. She bought it for three pounds of bread—an enormous fortune in the currency of hunger and suffering—so that she could use it to teach the children, as indeed she did for over two years. Eloquent, passionate, persuasive—she carried the day and in a *hora'as sha'a* (an extraordinary decision) the children were given matzah. On the *Seder* night, the Bluzhever *Rebbe* conducted a *Seder* for the children of the death camp. Instead of living in freedom and learning about slavery and redemption, he taught them, who were living in slavery, of the hope of redemption and freedom. He interpreted the Four Questions to reflect the concentration camp experience. He told them that the word עבדים, slaves, is composed of the initials of דוד בן ישי עבדך משיחך, David son of Jesse, Your servant, Your anointed. He told them that one day they would look back at the bitterest of exile nights as the prelude of a new redemption. Today, those children, who had learned from a *Tanach* bought with bread and eaten *matzos* baked with tears, are leaders in the rebirth of Torah in America, England, and Israel.

from "Embers Midst the Ruins," by Rabbi Nosson Scherman (JO, June, '78).

Rebbe, together with his two children, flew to England for the *bris*. When a local dignitary requested that the *Rebbe* remain for a few more days, he replied, "I came here for one purpose: to realize what I had lost during the war and to appreciate what I had gained. *Chazal* tell us that he who raises an orphan is considered as having begotten him. Raising one's own child is natural; however, the spiritual satisfaction of raising an orphan is especially great. I want to retain this satisfaction without it being diluted with anything else."

The *Rebbe* later related that as he walked to the *bris* that morning, flanked by his three sons, he experienced the height of spiritual pleasure.

FAITHFULLY AT HIS SIDE

For the last forty-two years of the *Rebbe*'s life, the *Rebbetzin* stood faithfully at his side. Those close to his family say that her presence was no small factor in the full life that the *Rebbe* led until he was in his upper nineties.

They shared common goals and aspirations. Soon after their marriage, the *Rebbetzin* gave the *Rebbe* a *kvittel*, in the manner of any *Chassideste*. She wrote, "May there be true *ahavas Yisroel* in the next generation."

Until his weakened condition made it impossible, the *Rebbe* prepared a morning cup of coffee for his wife each and every day.

Both the *Rebbe* and the *Rebbetzin* never allowed an important occasion to pass without making reference to the Six Million.

OF NOBILITY AND SIMPLICITY

One of the *Rebbe's Chassidim*, Rabbi Mordechai Eliezer Leiner, remarked: "There are probably very many people who consider themselves among those closest to the *Rebbe*—and for good reason. The *Rebbe* exuded warmth, concern, and *pashtus* (simplicity), and he made you feel that you really *were* close to him."

His *pashtus* manifested itself in many ways. At a *tisch* one evening, a man who wanted to leave early motioned to someone to fetch his coat, which was hanging on a hook near the *Rebbe*'s seat. Thinking that the man had motioned to him, the *Rebbe* jumped up from his chair, reached for the coat and handed it to the now red-faced individual.

All his years in America, the *Rebbe* never allowed a sign bearing the name of his *beis midrash** to be hung on the outside of the building. As he put it, "Is it really necessary to announce that 'Here lives the Bluzhever *Rebbe*'? If someone needs me or my *beis midrash*, he will find us without a sign."

*The *beis midrash* is named "*Beis HaMidrash Tzvi LaTzaddik*."

A TZADDIK'S WIT

The *Tzvi LaTzaddik*, it is said, possessed a sparkling wit. His grandson did, as well.

One Friday night, the *gabbai* of the Bluzhever *beis midrash*, Reb Moshe Fuhrer, noticed that a few "regulars" had become lost among the crowd and had not received any *shirayim**. He called to the *Rebbe*, "This one has not had . . . this one has not had. . . . " The *Rebbe* responded with a phrase from a *pasuk*: "Moshe, why do you scream to me?" (*Shemos* 14,15) Reb Moshe quickly retorted with the second half of the *pasuk*: "Speak to the 'sons of Yisroel' [i.e., the *Rebbe*'s *Chassidim*] that they should move on!"

During his only visit to *Eretz Yisroel*, the *Rebbe* was accorded great honor wherever he went. In the airport, he was escorted by Tel Aviv's venerable *Rav*, Rabbi Meir Landau. As the two walked down the street, they were jostled from behind by a huge crowd that surged forward to be near the *Rebbe*. Rabbi Landau was obviously upset by the pushing. The *Rebbe* remarked to Rabbi Landau, "Better a lot of pushing than no pushing at all!"

*The distribution of *shirayim*, that which remains of the food from which the *Rebbe* has partaken, is a common feature at the table of a Chassidic *Rebbe*. That this act possesses deeper meaning was apparent in Bluzhev. Whenever the *Rebbe* apportioned *shirayim*, he would first look to see whose hand was extended. Once, a young man was given a portion and respectfully gave it away to an older man. The *Rebbe* protested, "No. This portion was meant for you. What you need, he does not need, and what he needs, you do not need."

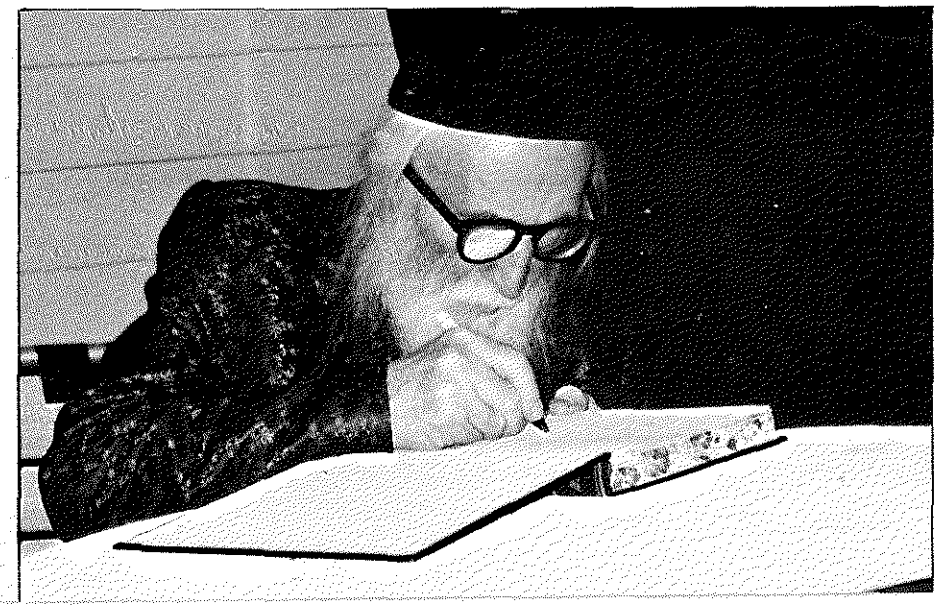
IV.
Respect for All

Rabbi David Singer, the distinguished *Rav* of Cong. Anshei Sefard in Boro Park, enjoyed a very close relationship with the *Rebbe*, and spent many summers in the *Rebbe*'s company—initially in Bethlehem, New Hampshire. Rabbi Singer recalls that the *Rebbe* earned the respect of virtually everyone. In the late 1940's, he met a secularist Jew who was an aide to President Truman. This man was so impressed with the *Rebbe* that he visited him in his Brooklyn home a number of times.

Another secularist Jew in New Hampshire did not have these same feelings of reverence. One day, this fellow openly ridiculed the *Rebbe*'s flowing *payos* and beard. In a friendly way, the *Rebbe* responded, "Do you think that I can't afford the dollar for a trim? I certainly can. But, you see, this"—and the *Rebbe* tugged at his own beard—"is grown for an important reason. It has *real meaning*."

The man was taken aback and hastily said, "Rabbi, you've got me. I'll never make a remark like that again."

One summer in a Catskill resort, the *Rebbe* frequented a non-Chassidic *shul* whose members accorded him enormous respect. One *Shabbos*, a guest who was something of a *chazan* led the *tefilla*. At one point, the man began to repeat words of the text for the



Rabbi Landau was obviously upset by the pushing of the huge crowd that surged forward. The Rebbe remarked to Rabbi Landau, "Better a lot of pushing than no pushing at all!"

sake of cantorial style, contrary to proper *tefilla*. This agitated the congregants, who pounded their fists and shouted that the man stop this practice. When *davening* was over, the man left the *shul* quickly. The Bluzhever *Rebbe* motioned to those who remained that he wished to speak. Said the *Rebbe*, "*Chazal* tell us that for shaming a Jew in public one forfeits his portion in the World-to-Come. Nowhere, however, is it said that one forfeits his portion in the World-to-Come for repeating words of the *nusach hatefilla* (prayer text)! I consider the outburst that occurred here today a serious mistake."

While he could not remain silent when another man's honor was hurt, he took the very opposite approach when his own honor was concerned. An acquaintance once made a remark intended in jest, but which he later realized was somewhat disrespectful to the *Rebbe*. When he asked the *Rebbe* forgiveness, the *Rebbe* motioned with his hand, indicating that nothing at all had occurred.

WISE COUNSELOR

The *Rebbe*'s reputation as a wise counselor was not earned through wisdom alone. Pride, personal interest, or a lack of sensitivity can befuddle the thinking of the most brilliant man. The *Rebbe*—the epitome of humility, concern and selflessness—perceived every problem and its solution with unusual clarity.

Someone close to the *Rebbe* was visited by a father and his son, the prospective mate for the man's daughter. On the host's table was a picture of the *Rebbe*, toward which the father made a disparaging comment; his son followed suit. After the meeting, the host phoned the *Rebbe* and related what had transpired. The man implied that he would reject the *shidduch* because of the slight to the *Rebbe*'s honor. Said the *Rebbe*, "The sole criterion for judging the *shidduch* should be the boy's merits and faults. Nothing else matters."

The man responded, "But doesn't such behavior indicate a lack of *mentchlichkeit* on the part of both father and son?"

"That is an altogether different matter," the *Rebbe* replied, and the *shidduch* was off.

In Galicia, the *Rebbe* had a young admirer whose personal conduct left something to be desired. One day, the *Rebbe* was informed that this young man was seen entering a theater. The *Rebbe* knew that were the fellow to be confronted directly and chastised, the result would be adverse. He therefore said nothing until an occasion when this young man visited the *Rebbe* with another young *Chassid*, who was of sterling quality. The *Rebbe* turned to the second *bachur*, and feigning agitation, said, "What is this I hear? Today's *bachurim* don't know what to do with their time? To movies, of all things . . . movies? How can people we regard so highly even think of doing such a thing!"

The *bachur* who was spoken to knew that the *Rebbe* did not mean him, while the other fellow got a very strong but indirect message.*

Among the more bizarre cases that came his way—in the 1950's—was a woman who refused the psychiatric help she desperately needed. Her family brought her to the *Rebbe*, who asked the woman what was bothering her. She replied that once, walking in the street, she had become startled by a plane flying overhead. She had expressed her outrage vehemently and, she imagined, the plane had crashed as a result. President Eisenhower, after learning that she had caused the crash, had sent agents to apprehend her, and she was on the run ever since.

As she related this fantastic tale, the *Rebbe* was attentive, as if believing every word. When she finished, the *Rebbe* said, "President Eisenhower liberated me from the concentration camp. We are old friends. I am certain that as a personal favor to me, the President will drop all charges against you."

With that, the *Rebbe* "dialed" Washington on his phone and "chatted" with the President. . . . After hanging up, the *Rebbe* told the woman, "The President says that he is willing to drop all charges against you—but on one condition: that you seek psychiatric help and that you obey the doctor's orders."

A few days later, the *Rebbe* received a call from the woman's psychiatrist. The doctor was curious to know where the *Rebbe* had received his training in counselling.

ANOTHER DIMENSION TO HIS GREATNESS

There were occasions when the *Rebbe* set aside his *pashtus*, and revealed some of his spiritual grandeur. Not long after the war had ended, he received an urgent request for help from a Bluzhever *Chassid* who had survived the camps and was then in Germany. The *Rebbe* summoned a few of his recently acquired young followers and asked that they raise the sizable sum that the man needed. The *Rebbe* said that this *mitzva* was a form of *pidyon she-*

*In retelling the above, it is appropriate to cite a homiletic interpretation which the *Rebbe* offered to the verse (*Vayikra* 19,17), whose simple translation is, "Rebuke your fellow man, and you shall not bear sin because of him." The *Rebbe* would say that at times it is necessary to rebuke in such a manner that the offender does not even realize he is being accused of sin, as if to read the verse: "Rebuke your fellow man, but do not attribute sin to him."

vuyim (redemption of a captive). He related that Reb Chaim of Sanz once announced to several of his followers that an enormous sum of money was needed for *pidyon shevuyim*, and he asked that someone present volunteer the sum. Sensing a reluctance, Reb Chaim added, "I assure whoever comes forth with the sum, that in the merit of this *mitzva*, he will never lack for anything all his life."

When the Bluzhever *Rebbe* said this, someone present said, "We would like the *Rebbe* to give us this same assurance."

The *Rebbe* was silent for a few moments before responding. "Yes," he finally said, "I give you that same assurance." The sum was raised.

Years later, one of those who had participated in the fund-raising found himself in desperate need of help. He went to the *Rebbe* and reminded him of his assurance. The *Rebbe* said, "*Ich halt vort*—I keep my word." The crisis passed.

• • •

A baby had developed a high fever, which did not break for days. The *Rebbe* was consulted and kept abreast of all developments. The doctor informed the family that he would wait only one more day before hospitalizing the infant. Early the next morning, the fever broke. At 7:00 A.M., the parents' phone rang. It was the *Rebbe*, asking how the baby was. He expressed gratitude to *Hashem* over the good tidings and then asked when the fever had broken. "And you did not inform me right away?" the *Rebbe* demanded.

The father apologized, explaining that he had not wanted to disturb the *Rebbe*'s sleep, to which the *Rebbe* retorted, "Do you think that I am someone who spends the whole night sleeping?!"

The *Rebbe* later told someone that as the days had worn on without the baby improving, he had sought every possible means to bring about a cure. "I opened the *Aron HaKodesh* and stuck my head inside. I summoned all my *Zeidas* (ancestors) and told them: 'It was I who gave this child his name . . . !' "

"DVEIKUS"

Intense *dveikus* was a trademark of the *Rebbes* of Dinov and Bluzhev. One year, shortly before *Shavuos*, the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* fell ill. A specialist from Vienna was called in. After examining his patient, the doctor declared that the *Tzvi LaTzaddik* was suffering from a quickened heartbeat. Upon being told of this, he remarked, "Utter nonsense! The doctor doesn't understand that one's heartbeat *always* quickens in anticipation of *Kabbolas HaTorah*!"

The *Rebbe*'s own performance of *mitzvos bein adam laMakom*, *mitzvos* between man and the Omnipresent, revealed his other-worldly sublimity. While his *avoda* (Divine service) was always performed without pomp or fanfare, the *Rebbe* could not conceal his burning love for Hashem and his *mitzvos*. In his *shul* on *Shavuos*, the reading of *Akdamus* was always preceded by the singing of *Boruch Hu Elokeinu*. As the *Chassidim* sang, the *Rebbe* wept, out of love for the Torah and its Giver. Contrary to his usual custom of facing the congregation during *krias haTorah*, the *Rebbe* would face the Eastern wall during the Torah reading on Shavuos morning, his face concealed by his *tallis*.

Virtually no one could help but gaze at the Rebbe's radiant countenance as he led the circuits around the *bima* on *Hoshana Rabba*. This radiance blended with his tears, particularly when he recited the words, הושע נא למען קדושים משלכים באש *Please save, in the merit of the holy martyrs who were cast into the fire.* One man remarked that when watching the *Rebbe* during *Hoshanos* for the first time, he felt as though he were watching a *tzaddik* of centuries ago.

Hakafos in the Bluzhever *Beis Midrash* on *Shemini Atzeres* and *Simchas Torah* were far removed from the levity with which some conduct this ritual. Of course, the people sang and danced, but it was a "rejoicing amid trembling" as the tears shed by the Bluzhever *Rebbe* had a pronounced effect on those assembled.

The father apologized for not calling during the night, explaining that he had not wanted to disturb the Rebbe's sleep, to which the Rebbe retorted, "Do you think that I am someone who spends the whole night sleeping!"

The *Rebbe* would say, "Whatever salvation one can possibly attain can be attained during the *Hakafos*." As an example, he would say that in the words, "*ozer dallim hoshe'a na*—Helper of the destitute, save now," lay a prayer for childbearing. An allusion to this can be found in the initials of these words, עדנה, a word which is found but once in the Torah, when the angel came to inform Avraham and Sarah that they would soon be blessed with a son.

The *Rebbe*'s moments of *dveikus* were not limited to *Shabbos* and *Yom Tov*. Virtually every picture of the *Rebbe* dancing at a wedding shows him with his eyes shut tightly, in a world of his own. His family relates that he was capable of sitting with his eyes shut in this way for great lengths of time, totally involved in other-worldly thoughts.

THE FINAL YEARS

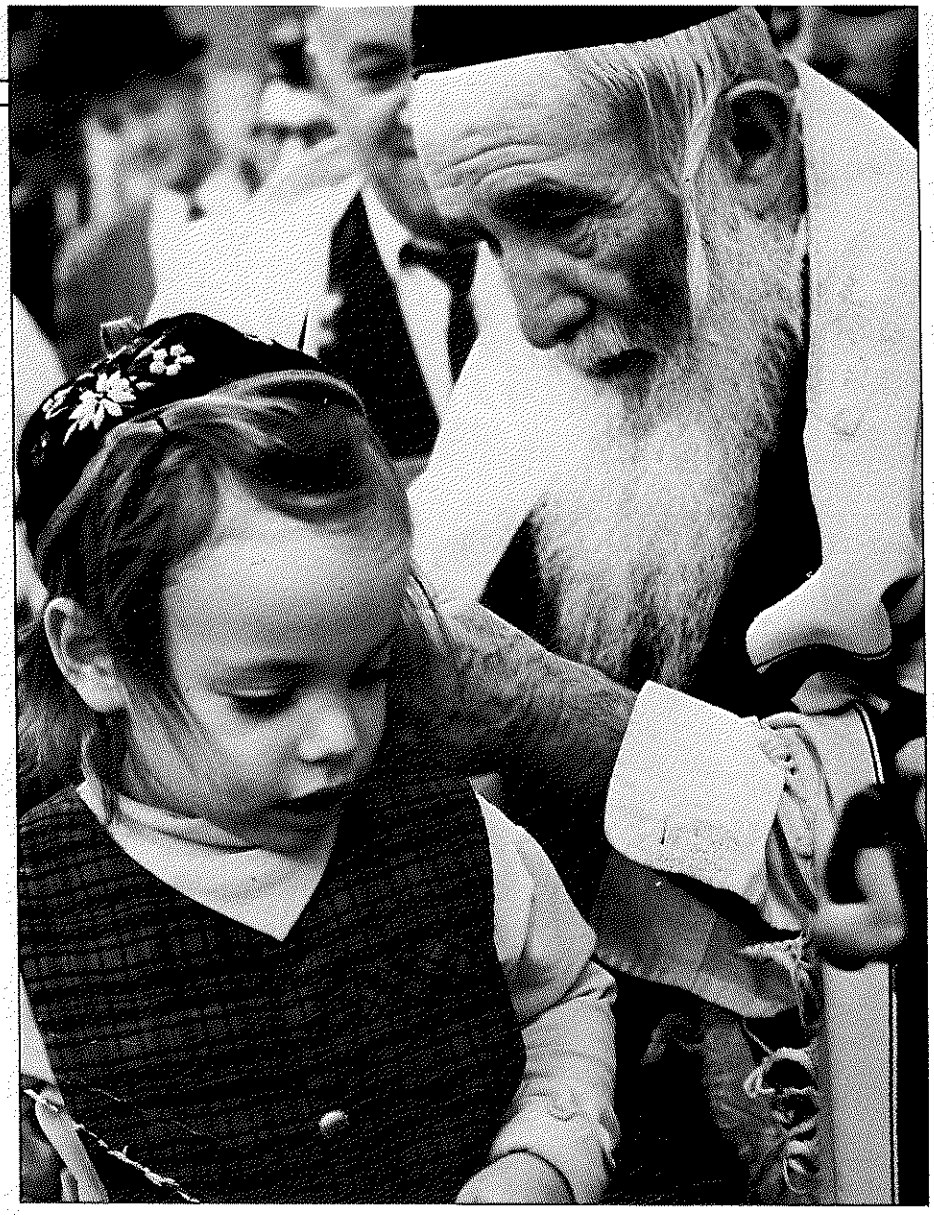
During the last few years of the *Rebbe*'s life, he grew steadily weaker. Until his last two years, he was fully alert and active. The last year and a half, the *Rebbe* was hospitalized in an extremely weakened condition. For most of

that time, he was conscious and lucid (thanks in large measure to the self-sacrificing efforts of Dr. David Levi). During this difficult period, the *Rebbe* received *kvitlach*, and weeks before his passing, served as *sandek* for a great grandson. When in need of constant attention, the immense closeness which his children and grandchildren felt for him was greatly manifest. Not for a moment was he left alone, and his personal needs were attended to in a manner that the hospital staff could only marvel over. Thus the doctors and nurses of the Maimonides I.C.U. felt the need to attend the *Rebbe*'s funeral.

About two weeks before the *Rebbe*'s passing, a religious Jew entered Maimonides Hospital for a medical procedure. When the nurse asked him a question regarding *tefillin*, the man asked if she was an observant Jew. She responded affirmatively, and added that she had become religious only a short time earlier. She explained:

One day, she was walking down a hospital corridor when her eye caught sight of a patient lying in his bed. The patient was an old bearded man, obviously a Chassidic Jew, and his face was unlike any she had ever seen. In fact, from the face alone, one would not have known that the man was very ill and weak; he looked radiant, fresh, alive! The nurse stared at the face for a few minutes before continuing on.

The nurse requested that she be transferred to this patient's ward, and her request was granted. From then on, she would stop by the room at least once a day, and gaze upon the countenance of the Bluzhever *Rebbe* for a few minutes. These daily visits inspired her to return to the traditions that this *tzaddik* had lived by.



HIS LEGACY

On the eve of Rosh Hashana, some six years after the *Rebbe* arrived on these shores, his voice became choked with emotion as he recited the *Kiddush* of *Yom Tov*. A few stifled groans escaped his lips before he went on to conclude the *Kiddush*. Afterwards, he explained to a guest, "At this great moment on the night of Rosh Hashana, I suddenly recalled all that our brethren suffered during the last *churban*, and I recalled my personal suffering as well. I recalled all that I had seen with my own eyes in the camps of destruction. . . . It required enormous inner strength on my part to suppress those thoughts, so that I would not burst out with intense weeping. I managed to limit myself to a few stifled groans."

For the *Rebbe*, the four decades after the war were one giant expression of inner strength, one ceaseless surge of faith and love of *Hashem*, so that the mission of his long and productive life could be fulfilled. The *Rebbe* has left a glorious legacy, to enrich this and future generations.

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Each year, at the conclusion of *Ne'ilas Hachag* on *Simchas Torah*, the *Rebbe* would close with the same themes. He would say that the long winter nights ahead should be spent in the toil of Torah study. He would continue, "We must study with peace of mind, amid a true love for one another and without any jealousy toward one another." The spread of Torah and the spread of *ahavas Yisroel*. These were the hopes and dreams of the Bluzhever *Rebbe*. And those who strive to live by his awesome legacy can turn his dreams into a reality. ■