

From: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com> Story #1152 (5780-19) 8 Sh'vat 5780 (Feb. 2020)
From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles <editor@ascentofsafed.com>

Wandering Jews in the 9th Arrondissement

The *farbrengen* (chasidic gathering) room in “770 Kfar Chabad” – a near replica of Lubavitch World Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkways in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, NY – was more packed than usual, Old-timers and community members as well as yeshiva students crowded around the tables, hoping to clearly hear and imbibe wisdom and history from **Rabbi Zalman Sudakevich** (1915-2012), one of the founders and builders of the chasidic village.

For several consecutive hours they listened spellbound, with only a few brief pauses to toast “*l'chayim*” and perhaps sing in unison a stirring chasidic melody, as Rabbi Sudakevich described to them the enormous difficulties of living a chasidic life in Russia during the decades of Communist oppression, arrests, torture and executions, which he himself also suffered personally.

He also related fascinating episodes from the years of struggle for the Russian Chasidic immigrants to Israel to establish Kfar Chabad (located one train stop east from Tel Aviv, before Lod and Ramle), at the instigation of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, **Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Shneerson** (the “*Rebbe Harayatz*”), and after the Rebbe passed away in 1950, with subsequent encouragement, instructions, advice and blessings of his son-in-law successor, Rabbi M.M. Shneerson, who also gave them specific instructions how to interact with government offices and the public.

At one point Rabbi Sudakevich digressed to tell about an unusual mission given to him by the Rebbe Harayatz during an interval in his life between the two long periods in Russia and Israel. It happened after the immigrants arrived in Paris from Russia, and had to be there for many months (and for some, years) before becoming able to continue on to Israel (or other countries that would accept them – yt).

“In 1947, several months after I reached Paris, a most unusual message was received from the Rebbe Harayatz. [He sent his son-in-law (and future successor), who was in France at the time to help with his mother’s immigration to America,] to instruct two senior chasidim, Rabbi Yehuda Hain and Rabbi Chayim Shreiber, should spend time walking through different streets of the city. I asked to accompany them.

“Why did the Rebbe require this? For what purpose? We had no idea. But the Rebbe had said that is what we should do, so, we did it.”

The three rabbis set out the next morning. Not having the faintest clue where or what direction to go, they wandered aimlessly through the Paris

metropolis, wherever their feet and impulses took them. [They knew that their appearance – full beards, prominent *peyot* (‘sidelocks’), black hats and long black jackets – would attract the glances of everyone who saw them.]

They turned into yet another side street, and before they had gone more than a few meters, they heard a call that halted them immediately.

I was a woman’s voice. “Jewish rabbis! Can you please wait for me a few moments?”

They looked up, seeking the source of the voice. In a fifth floor window they spotted a grey-haired older woman, who again called down to them, begging that they wait for her until she can come down to join them.

“Can this be what the Rebbe intended?” They murmured to each other.

The woman walked briskly up to them. Although slightly out of breath, she spoke with strong emotion. She identified herself as a Jewish woman, and that her grandson was soon to turn thirteen. It was her deepest wish and concern that he learn the basics of Judaism, that he know what is *tefillin* and be trained how to put them on.

Her voice broke. “I want him to celebrate his *bar-mitzvah* properly, like a kosher Jew, but I have no idea where in Paris there is someone who can instruct him for this.”

The three rabbis smiled broadly as they stared at each other in amazement. They felt certain this was why the Rebbe had insisted they wander around Paris.

They turned back to the woman and one of the older rabbis her directions to a synagogue not far [from the apartment house of her daughter, whom she was then visiting]. They knew that the rabbi there could teach the boy everything he needed, and in a warm manner.

Rabbi Sudakevich lifted his cup, proclaimed “I’chaim!” and concluded his recollection: “If we hadn’t taken our ‘stroll’ at the Rebbe’s orders, who knows if that boy crossing the threshold to the Jewish age of responsibility would ever have found out about the mitzvah of tefillin.”

Immediately, one of his listeners sprang to his feet. “Reb Zalman, do you know the name of the street in Paris where you met that woman, and which shul you directed her to?”

His tone of voice was one of curiosity, but those sitting near him saw that he was tense as a coiled spring.

Rabbi Sudakevich stared at his questioner, **Rabbi David Lesselbaum**, a devoted chasid who also was a resident of Kfar Chabad, and hesitated to

reply. “Ah, this was many years ago, several decades, but if I remember correctly, it was in the Fifth District, on Fourth or Fifth Street.” He paused again as scratched his forehead. “And the name of the shul was Rashi Synagogue.”

“Unbelievable!” exploded Rabbi Lesselbaum. “According to your description, the woman that you three spoke to was my grandmother of blessed memory [who was visiting my aunt who lived in the Ninth Arrondissement (district)], and the bar-mitzvah boy...was me!”

All those present stared at Lesselbaum in astonishment. He continued: “Indeed, 1947 was the year of my bar-mitzvah. I received from my parents an education totally devoid from Judaism, but somehow my grandmother managed to convince them that I deserved to be given a taste of authentic Judaism in preparation for my bar-mitzvah. My private lessons took place in the Rashi Shul, which I now understand my grandmother knew about only because of her encounter with you three rabbis!”

Rabbi David Lesselbaum is a well-known figure among the French-speaking Jews in Israel. Over the years he has helped hundreds of them to grow in their observance of Torah and the commandments, all due to the mysterious demand of the Rebbe Harayatz of his three chasidim to wander aimlessly through the street and alleys of Paris.

~~~~~

Source: Translated by Yerachmiel Tilles from *HaGeula* #876. The four sentences in square brackets [ ] are from the “JEM: Here’s My Story” (#319) interview of Rabbi David Lesselbaum.

Connection: Seasonal – *Yud Shvat* (this Tuesday night, Wednesday) is the 70<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit* of **Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn of Lubavitch**.

*Editor’s note:* For those who were expecting a story about *Nasi Doreinu* for this occasion, be patient; there will be one next week and another two weeks after that. Meanwhile, for *Yud Shvat*, let’s give honor to the Rebbe Rayatz and connect to him on his annual day of soul-elevation.

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn** [of blessed memory: 12 Tammuz 5640 - **10 Shvat** 5710 (Jan. 1880-June 1950)], known as the **Rebbe Rayatz**, was the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, from 1920 to 1950. He established a network of Jewish educational institutions and Chassidim that was the single most significant factor for the preservation of Judaism during the dread reign of the communist Soviets. In 1940 he moved to the USA, established Chabad world-wide headquarters in Brooklyn and launched the global campaign to renew and spread Judaism in all languages and in every corner of the world, the campaign continued and expanded so remarkably successfully by his son-in-law and successor, Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneerson.

