

## ***Father of Orphans***

**Rabbi Eliezer-Zusia Portugal** was a prominent follower of the Shtefaneshter Rebbe, of the Rhuzhiner dynasty, but he did not assume the mantle of Rebbe until well into his sixties. His first "career" was as Rabbi of the town of Skulyany (Skulen), in Bessarabia (wherever that is, or rather, was!). His focus there was on increasing the spiritual level of his town-folk, including writing booklets in *Yiddish* specifically tailored to the spiritual needs of his neighbors.

When the Sadigorer Rebbe visited Skulen and saw Rabbi Eliezer Zusia's accomplishments, he urged him to move to Chernowitz, where he could serve a larger community. The Skulener complied, and before long was chosen as chief rabbi of that city. (The wisdom of the Sadigorer Rebbe was demonstrated soon after, when Bessarabia was invaded by the Russian Communists, under whom the Jews suffered terribly.)

Chernowitz, too, changed hands several times during World War II, eventually ending up in the Soviet Union. A new chapter in Rebbe Eliezer Zusia's life opened after the war, when he became the father of hundreds of war orphans, even formally adopting scores of them. Later he smuggled his "family" into Rumania and settled in Bucharest where he adopted even more children. [In his will, the Skulener asked that his "children" show their appreciation by remaining loyal to Judaism and studying Torah at every possible moment.]



Nothing could stand in the diminutive Skulener's way to fulfill his mission to rescue Jews who were in need. In Chernowitz, he assisted Soviet Jews who had smuggled themselves across the border into Romania. It was much easier there to get papers to enable them to go on to America or Israel.

Whenever these Jews were caught they were immediately found guilty. The punishment was imprisonment in Siberia or a quick bullet to the head. The Rebbe was indefatigable; "I will get them out - regardless!" he exclaimed.

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The colonel who was in charge of the border guards lived in Chernowitz and knew the Skulener well. The Rebbe had won him over many a time with heartrending entreaties on behalf of his brethren. The last time he was there the colonel had told him, "This is the very last time you will bother me. If you come again on behalf of your Jews, I will kill you!"

Nonetheless, when the Skulener was notified about a family of nine people that had been captured, he immediately undertook the daunting and dangerous task of rescuing them. Nothing worked, not even a hefty bribe. They were adamant; these people were to serve as an example for others.

There was only one avenue left to be employed: he would go to the colonel and beg, regardless of the imminent personal danger involved. Jewish lives were at stake and that was more important than his own life.

His family begged him not to go. "How can you risk your life like this?" they asked. He responded, "It is not clear that he will take out his wrath against me, but one thing is for sure, their lot is sealed unless I am able to do something in their behalf."

The Skulener approached the colonel's house with trepidation, climbed up the steps and knocked on the door. When the colonel saw who stood at his doorstep, he was overcome with anger. He grabbed the Rebbe and threw him down the stairs. The Skulener was hurt badly, yet, with extreme difficulty, he was able to get up. With the little strength he had left, he once again climbed the stairs and knocked on the colonel's door.

The colonel opened the door and could not believe his eyes. There stood the Skulener Rebbe, dirty, bloodied, clothes torn - but with defiance in his eyes. "I must speak to you, colonel!" the Skulener said, with tears streaming down his face. The colonel listened: the Rebbe begged, he cried, as he depicted the bitter plight of this hapless family. The colonel's hardened heart could not ignore the selfless pleas, the heartfelt emotion of the Skulener Rebbe. His devotion to others at the expense of his own wellbeing finally overcame the colonel's resistance. The family was freed.

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At the end of the World War II, he immediately founded institutions for the orphans of the Holocaust. He saved thousands of orphans. He personally cared for some three hundred of them, all of whom called him "*Tatteh*." Almost all of them settled in Israel and remained observant Jews.

Many people in Israel claim to be sons-in-law of the Skulener Rebbe, and call him their father-in-law. This sounded strange because the Skulener did not have girls of his own at all. Then the mystery became understood: the orphaned ones were regarded as his daughters, and the Rebbe had married them off to men who were then regarded themselves as his sons-in-law.

In chapter 19 of the memoirs of Rabbi Binyamin Goro-detzky, who was the Lubavitcher Rebbe's emissary for "secret operations" in Europe and North Africa, Gorodetzky describes how the Skulener Rebbe enlisted the help of Lubavitch and of the Joint Distribution Committee to free Jews who were imprisoned in Rumania. At that time, communist Rumania did not permit emigration. However, the Skulener reported that for \$2k, a Jewish prisoner could be released and permitted to emigrate from Rumania secretly with his family. From 1960 to 1962, a total of 400 families, including over 2000 individuals, were saved, thanks to the Skulener Rebbe

Because of his rescue activities, the Skulener was persecuted, and sometimes tortured, by both the Germans and Russians. More than once his life was in danger. One day he was even taken out to be executed by a firing squad, but he was saved from the Germans by a miracle.

The Russians also imprisoned him several times as did the Rumanians. Nevertheless, the Skulener never stopped his appointed task. Despite the danger, he remained in Romania. He was loathe to leave the country until the last of his "children" had reached safety. During this period the well-being of all of Romanian Jewry was hanging by a thread. The Rebbe's home was the only address for all matters of holiness and Jews would come calling day and night.

The governmental authorities viewed his spiritual work as a challenge to Communism and accused him of trying to supplant the state as the orphans' guardian in order to send them to Israel. Two weeks before Passover in 1959, the Skulener was imprisoned with his son. They were put in a notorious prison together with dangerous criminals, isolated from one another so that they would not conspire together. The charges: smuggling children to Israel and spying for the US and Israel. They were jailed for five months.

After months of tremendous international efforts, including the intervention of United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammar-skjold, (and at the behest of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the influence of a prominent, non-chasidic Rabbi in Cincinnati, Eliezer Silver, who intervened at the U.S. State Department and with the Romanian ambassador), the Skulener Rebbe and son were freed. He emigrated immediately.

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Eventually, in the spring of 1960, the Skulener was able to settle in the United States. He chose America over Israel so he could better help those who remained in Rumania [similar to the decisions of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Lubavitcher Rebbes].

When he was encouraged to open a *yeshiva* in his new country, his response was, "What would my *yeshiva* add to all the others? A person who wants to do a *mitzva* must ask how he can give the most 'pleasure' to G-d." Instead, he founded the "*Chessed L'Avraham*" network of schools in Israel to compete with leftist anti-religious schools for the children of immigrants to that country.

In 1961, Rabbi Eliezer Zusia visited Israel for the first time. One of his side-trips was to a left-wing kibbutz to forgive a Rumanian socialist who had been one of his fiercest opponents years before. (That man's descendants later became observant.)

An aide of the Skulener Rebbe once related: Among the many people whom the Rebbe had rescued from Europe was a woman who had informed the Rumanian government of his religious activities, which led to his arrest and imprisonment. The aide asked him why did he want to go to such effort and expense to save a person who and caused him so much trouble and pain?

"You have no idea," the Rebbe said with tears in his eyes, "how much she suffered beforehand, and how tempting the authorities make it to inform."

Towards the end of the years that he lived in the Crown Heights district of Brooklyn, in the mid 70's, the Skulener *shul* did not always have a morning *minyan*, due to the extraordinary length of the Skulener Rebbe's prayers and the fact that most of his Chasidim no longer lived in that section of Brooklyn. On many such occasions the Skulener Rebbe would go to the main Lubavitcher *shul* nearby. If the Lubavitcher Rebbe was present and it was a day when the Torah was read, the Lubavitcher would give his *aliya* to the Skulener. It is not clear that anyone else was ever given that honor by the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

In a private audience with the Rebbe in 1974, the Rebbe contended that the Skulener Rebbe had the power to actualize the final redemption. When the Skulener Rebbe resisted, the Rebbe remarked, that he was displaying "uncalled-for humbleness."

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The Skulener Rebbe was endowed with many fine traits which he applied to his Divine service, in particular his intense feeling and talent for music. As a "sweet singer of Israel", he composed many Chasidic melodies which are sung with enthusiasm still today, drawing the hearts of Jews across the spectrum.

His *niggunim* are very soulful, yet full of emotion and enthusiasm. Sometimes he would interrupt the singing to give a Torah explanation to some of the words of a song and then continue the melody. Similarly, at *Havdala*, he would recite it normally, then, when he came to "*LaYehudim Haysa Orah*," he would sing his own *niggun* and start everyone off dancing. It was an incredible experience!

On occasion he would suddenly halt whatever he was doing and sit at full attention. Everyone present would freeze as the Rebbe began to hum a new tune never heard before. Eventually they would join in and a new Skulener *niggun* would be officially born, direct from Heaven. [I, YT, personally witnessed this one Shabbat night.]

He prayed with an extraordinary enthusiasm, and very lengthily. It was not unusual for those in his minyan to open a *Gemara*, *Chumash*, or other holy book to learn during *Maariv* after *Baruch Hu* until the Rebbe finished the *Shma* prayer 10-15 minutes later! No one became bored or wanted to leave because of the delay, for they knew they were praying together with someone really special. [Somehow I once merited to be a guest for the Shabbat evening meal at the table of the

Skulener Rebbe, R. Eliezer-Zusia Portugal-- just he, me, and the Rebbetzin. *Kiddush* took as long as the *Shma Yisrael!*]

It has been said: “Whoever did not see the prayers of the first Skulener Rebbe never saw a real *davvening*.” Those who did not witness the intensity of his prayers and hear the melody which accompanied his deep concentration, never witnessed how a heart can cling to the love of his Creator.

The Skulener Rebbe continued his rescue and outreach efforts after arriving in America, visiting Israel eight times and expanding his *Chessed L'Avraham* network of charity organizations and schools.

Throughout his lifetime, he was a paragon of kindness and the *mitzva* of ‘redeeming captives.’ He passed away in 1982.

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His only natural son, Rabbi **Yisrael-Avraham** Portugal, the second Skulener Rebbe, continued his father's holy work in America as well as in Israel, from his home on the Boro Park section of Brooklyn. He passed away last year at age 95. His funeral was attended by many tens of thousands. He left five sons and three daughters.

The oldest son, Rebbe Yeshaya Yakov Portugal, who already had many followers, was crowned as the Skulener Rebbe in Boro Park. His second son, Rebbe Meir Portugal, was crowned as Skulener Rebbe in Williamsburg. His third son, Rebbe Efraim Yehuda Portugal, was crowned as Skulener Rebbe in Monsey. His fourth son, Rebbe Zvi Noach Portugal, was crowned as Skulener Rebbe . in Lakewood. His youngest son, Rebbe Shmuel Mordechai Portugal was crowned as Skulener Rebbe in Jerusalem. His three sons-in-law are all important Skulener rabbinic personages.

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*Source:* Compiled, reordered, supplemented, updated and edited by Yerachmiel Tilles from previous stories in this series, #561 & 613, from ten plus years ago (see there for original sources). Both photos courtesy of Chabad.org.

*Biographical note:*

**Rebbe Eliezer Zusia Portugal** [1 Cheshvan, 1898 - **29 Av** 1982], *the first Skulener Rebbe*, immigrated to the USA in 1960, after imprisonment in Rumania and international efforts to secure his release. He is the author of *Noam Eliezer* and *Kedushas Eliezer*, but is best known for his superhuman efforts to rescue Jewish orphans and refugees in Eastern Europe before, during and after WWII and his continuing support of them, and his Chessed L'Avraham network of schools for children that continue until today. Those who merited to be in his presence were astonished by the length of his prayers and the beauty and intensity of the tunes that he composed, many of which have become internationally famous today.

*Connection:* Wednesday, Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul, 29 Menachem Av, is the 38<sup>th</sup> yearzeit of Rabbi Eliezer-Zusia Portugal.