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## A SURPRISE VISITOR IN PARIS

*Through her lifetime **Rebbetzin Chaya-Mushka Schneerson**, of blessed memory, masterfully avoided publicity and remained very much behind the scenes. Because of her accomplished reserve during her brief visit to France in 1954, very few people there were even aware of her presence.*

*In fact, the only members of the Lubavitch community then living in Paris who knew about her stay were the administrators of Lishkah, the Lubavitch refugee aid organization. They had been notified of her visit by the Rebbe and briefly requested to provide any necessary assistance.*

*Appointed liaison **Rabbi Raphael Wilschanski**<sup>1</sup> related his memories of that visit.*

IN ORDER TO assess the condition of the many Jewish refugees who were then living in Paris, the Rebbetzin made a clandestine visit to the city and stayed for several days. Although we had been instructed to provide as much assistance as possible, she hardly needed any. She stayed at a hotel and, apart from Shabbos meals, provided her own food.

During this time I met twice with the Rebbetzin and had several short telephone conversations with her, during which she expressed deep concern for many chasidim who were then living in Paris as refugees from the former Soviet Union. Having left the horrors of that regime with little more than their lives, many were suffering from dire poverty.

One group of 30 families was crowded into a 36-room hotel subsidized by the American Joint Distribution Committee. All of these families, some of which included many children, were compelled to share one kitchen. The Rebbetzin, deeply concerned, wanted to know every detail of how they lived.

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<sup>1</sup> Of blessed memory. Father of the heads of the large Chabad yeshivas in Tsfat, Israel and Morristown, New Hersey.

Her compassionate questions were those of a mother for her children. One night, in order to understand the situation as fully as possible, she visited the hotel in secret. In total anonymity she was able to observe their real living conditions.

Each of her questions was phrased with a care that revealed deep empathy. She also elegantly managed to avoid speaking about anything inappropriate.

### **Rebbeim of Three Generations**

The Rebbetzin's mellow sensitivity was also in evidence when we spoke about the township of Lubavitch itself. It is difficult to describe the longing with which she described the home of her late grandfather the *Rebbe Rashab*,<sup>2</sup> the students of the original *Tomchei Temimim* Yeshivah, and the atmosphere in Lubavitch before the rise of Communism forced the dispersal of his chasidim. Her words sounded exactly like the words of some revered elder chasid who himself had absorbed his Torah learning in that unique atmosphere.

The Rebbetzin conveyed a similar profound respect for her father, the Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe.<sup>3</sup> When mentioning the branches of *Tomchei Temimim* that had opened in America following her father's arrival, she remarked, "Only a giant like my father could have accomplished such a revolution!"

Only at one point did she briefly mention her husband, the [Seventh] Rebbe.<sup>4</sup> Saying that during the few days of her stay she would have very little time for herself she observed, "If my husband had a little free time, by now he would have prepared a *siyum* [academic ceremony] to mark the completion of Tractate *Bava Basra*."<sup>5</sup>

She added that although it was close to Pesach, a particularly busy time of year, the Rebbe was somehow finding time to prepare a *siyum*

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<sup>2</sup> The Fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shalom-DovBer Schneersohn

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn, the *Rebbe Rayatz*.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Menachem-Mendel Schneerson.

<sup>5</sup> The longest of the 36 tractates of Talmud [and the other 27 tractates of *Mishna* without *Gemora*].

for *Erev Pesach*, a custom of firstborn sons to do so on that day instead of fasting.<sup>6</sup>

### **Reflected Joy**

The Rebbetzin displayed the same concern for my family as she had toward the refugees. Whenever in later years I visited her in New York, she wanted to know about my children in detail, including their academic progress and their general activities.

Toward the end of one of those visits I said, “May the Rebbe be healthy and derive much *nachas* [satisfaction] from us.”

To which she replied simply, “We have *nachas* when we hear that you have *nachas*.”

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*Source:* Excerpted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from a report in a *Machon Avner* newsletter.

*Biographical note:* **Rebbetzin Chaya-Moussia Schneerson** [25 Adar 5661- **22 Shvat** 5748 (March 1901 - Feb. 1988)] was the daughter of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef-Yitzchak Schneersohn. Born and raised in Russia, on 14 Kislev 5689 (Dec. 1928), she married the future Rebbe, her distant cousin, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in Warsaw. She devoted herself totally to supporting her husband in his role as a leader of world Jewry, and was known in her own right for her modesty, erudition, piety and good deeds.



*Connection:* Wednesday night – Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> of the Jewish month of Shvat, is the *yahrzeit* of the 7th Lubavitcher Rebbetzin.

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<sup>6</sup> Because completing a Talmudic tractate is considered a joyous occasion, so the one who did so is entitled to host a mitzvah meal, which exempts himself and all who heard the completion from the obligation of the first-born to fast on that day.