

IllumiNations

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

Rabbi Mordechai and Rivka Glazman, Chabad of Latvia, Riga, Latvia

Riga's Reawakening

By Chaya Chazan

I'm a born and bred Crown Heightser, accustomed to my American creature comforts. So even after I married my Israeli husband, I clearly asserted I couldn't possibly imagine myself moving on shlichus to anywhere exotic. Even *France* was too foreign for me.

When we were offered a position in Florida, I was thrilled. My husband flew there to check it out, and I mentally began preparing for a life in the warmth and sun.

Meanwhile, Rabbi Kotlarsky AH, the vice president of Merkos, approached my husband with a different and intriguing offer - shlichus in Riga, Latvia. By that point, I'd matured enough to understand that I could manage to survive outside of the U.S., but my husband still turned it down, explaining that we'd almost finalized a different shlichus.

We wrote to the Rebbe to ask for a bracha for the Florida shlichus, but received no answer.

Rabbi Kotlarsky approached my husband again. "This is a very special shlichus," he explained. "Mr. Sammy Rohr recently visited Riga on a business trip and was surprised not to find a Chabad presence there. He promised the Rebbe full support to any shliach who moves there. The Rebbe asked me to find a couple for this shlichus. Today, the Rebbe asked me again if I'd found anyone yet!"

"Let me ask my wife," my husband replied. He hurried home and shared what Rabbi Kotlarsky had told him.



"Let's write in now!" I urged him, excitedly. "Quickly! It's very rare for the Rebbe to be personally involved in finding shluchim for a specific place, so let's snatch this up immediately!"

We sent a letter stating our willingness to move to Riga, with the Rebbe's consent and brachos.

That weekend was the International Kinus Hashluchos. In anticipation of shortly becoming a shlucha, I received permission to attend. It was the perfect introduction to shlichus. I was filled with awe and inspiration, knowing I'd soon take my place amongst this extraordinary sisterhood of heroines.

During the Kinus, the Rebbe's office announced that the Rebbe would be distributing *Kuntres Chof Beis Shevat*, a collection of sichos and letters specifically addressed to and about women. Of course, all programming for the day was halted, and we all ran to 770 to receive our copy. When I opened the first page to begin learning it, I froze in shock. The first sicha was one the Friediker Rebbe had said - to the women of *Riga, Latvia*. I knew then everything would work out.

A month after we received our answer, my husband prepared for an initial visit for Purim. On Chof Vav Adar I, 1992, he stood in line and received a dollar from the Rebbe. He told the Rebbe he was leaving for Riga shortly, and received the Rebbe's bracha for shlichus.

The next day, we received the shocking news that the Rebbe had a stroke. It was the last time the Rebbe ever gave out dollars or spoke publicly.

My husband's trip was very successful. The Purim event was well-attended, and everyone assured him they'd be happy to see Chabad in Riga.

I took my toddler to the park just after we'd moved, so we could get away from the endless boxes for a while. I chatted with him cheerfully in Yiddish as I pushed him on the

swings and helped him down the slide. I saw a woman on a nearby bench react quite strongly when she heard my Yiddish, so I smiled and introduced myself. I didn't speak Russian then, so communication was difficult, but with lots of hand gestures and emphatically repeated words, I invited her for Shabbos and gave her our address.

"We have our first Shabbos guests!" I sang out to my husband as my baby and I arrived back home. "I *think*. I hope she understood!"

She *did* understand, and showed up with her son and daughter. When she expressed a wish for her children to learn about Yiddishkeit and meet other Jewish friends, we immediately jumped on it. The very next day, we opened a Sunday school and an afternoon yeshiva. Her kids brought their friends, and the group grew, week by week!

We advertised our first major event - a Shavuos shiur by a visiting lecturer - in the local paper. We got dozens of calls about it, but unfortunately, if the callers didn't speak Yiddish, I couldn't communicate with them. There was one caller, Rosa*, who spoke Yiddish, and it was a pleasure to finally *talk* with someone!

The event was well attended, but I sat in the back, listening to the swirling Russian all around me. I finally found Rosa, and we had a good chat. Our discussion led me to begin a weekly women's class, given in Yiddish. I continued that class for over twenty years, and it was the highlight of my week, every time.

I gave each woman a transliterated siddur to use. I asked the women to translate each tefillah into Russian, so they could understand what they were saying.

When Victoria* began to read Shema, a warm smile rose to my lips. Instead of translating *And you shall love G-d with all your heart*, Victoria read, *And I will love G-d with all my heart...* She read the tefillos like they were personal - her own conversation with Hashem.

Victoria has a hard life, and turns to Tehillim constantly. She knows the entire sefer by heart in Russian, and can easily quote from any kapitel at will. Her sincerity is an inspiration and a reminder how special and important davening is.

At that same event, I also met Sofija*, a young woman who spoke English.

"What are your plans for the summer?" I asked her, politely making conversation.

"Oh, I don't have anything planned yet," she said.

"What would you think about working in a camp?" I asked, without really thinking.

"That sounds great!" Sofija was immediately enthusiastic. "I have friends who can be staff, my dad has connec-

tions to get sports equipment, and my mother is a realtor, so she can help find a place to host it!"

It was just a month after we'd moved, and summer was just a few weeks away, so I didn't think it was practical. But Sofija followed through on all her promises, and Camp Gan Yisroel of Riga was born!

Rabbi Shmuel Lew, a shliach in London, and the headmaster of the girls' high school there, offered us a spot for any girl we wanted to send. He promised to house them, feed them, educate them, and help them get married.

Aliza* attended our school from preschool through 8th grade. Every summer, she joined Camp Gan Yisroel of Riga and loved every minute. Baruch Hashem, the education she received prompted her to accept Rabbi Lew's offer to study in London. After high school, Aliza met a nice young man, and they settled in Israel. They had three beautiful daughters, and brought them up in a home that glowed with the warmth of Yiddishkeit and love of Torah.

One day, Aliza called with an interesting request. "Can I register my daughters for Gan Yisroel in Riga this summer?" she asked.

"We'd love to have them!" I answered. "But... don't you live in Israel?"

Aliza sighed. "I have such amazing memories of Gan Yisroel from my childhood. It really impacted my life, and every moment was filled with fun and learning. I want to give my daughters that same experience. I've looked around, but I can't find any camp here that can even half-way match my incredible memories of yours! We'll spend the summer in Riga, so my daughters can enjoy the same wonderful moments I was privileged to have."

Aliza rented a house for the summer and spent the season with us. Her daughters were all enrolled in camp, and seemed to revel in it as much as their mother did when she was their age. In fact, Aliza returned the next year, so her daughters could, once again, create lasting memories in Gan Yisroel of Riga.

During those summer months, Aliza spent a lot of time with our daughter, Chaya, who had been her childhood friend. Chaya and her husband, Akiva, have joined our shlichus here with their beautiful family of seven children ka"n.

"I don't know how you do it!" Aliza confessed to Chaya one day. "Seven kids! How do you manage? I only have three, and I'm exhausted!"

Chaya explained how every neshama is a precious gift, and how the birth of each child brings us closer to Moshich.

"Well, kudos to you," Aliza replied. "Personally, I'm done. Three is enough for me!"

A moment later, she added, "Truthfully, my husband would love to have a boy, but I told him we're done!"

Chaya and Aliza discussed the subject for a while, with Chaya passionately and eloquently explaining the brachos inherent in large families. She wasn't sure if her words had moved Aliza at all, but she felt she'd done her best.

About a year or so later, we celebrated our daughter's wedding in Israel. Aliza was invited, and we welcomed her - *and her two-week-old son* - with joy and excitement!

Our school, now serving students in grades pre-K through 12th, is housed in a historical building that was the first Jewish school in the Russian Empire. Originally opened by maskilim in 1838, who were obviously unhappy with the cheder model, the school was a prototype for Jewish educational reform, as touted by the maskilim. It evolved as the regimes changed hands from the Nazis to the Communist Party, but we were finally able to reclaim the school for its true purpose.

On opening day, an elderly member of the community walked excitedly through the halls, recalling happy memories from his childhood, as well as the more turbulent recollections of his adulthood.

"This is where I learned Gemara!" he clapped, pointing to a small room in the corner. "Here is where Jews came to find out what happened to their relatives..." he continued, in a subdued tone. "And over there is where they rounded up the Jews and shot us."

The full gamut of human experience crossed his face as he wandered the ancient building. Finally, he turned to us with a shining smile. "I can't believe these walls will once again ring with the pure sound of Jewish children learning Torah," he said. "After all they've seen, finally, they can feel at home again."

When we opened our first kindergarten class, I advertised for a Jewish teacher. A woman named Yehudis* answered the ad, expressing wonder at being *chosen* for being Jewish, when that had been a reason for rejection all her life.

Yehudis had been brought up in a non-Jewish household, so she knew nothing of Torah or mitzvos, but she was a quick learner! As she taught her class about Shabbos, she learned, too. She began implementing it in her home.

One day, she bumped into an elderly neighbor, Luba. Luba asked where she worked, and was surprised to hear Yehudis' answer.

"What do you teach about?" she asked, curiously.

Yehudis excitedly told her all about Shabbos, and invited Luba to join her family that Friday night. Luba was intrigued, since she'd never been to a Shabbos meal.

A few weeks later, I mentioned that we were looking for a librarian. Yehudis immediately suggested Luba. It was the perfect shidduch! Luba used every moment of down time to explore the library. She voraciously devoured every Russian sefer we had.

When Luba learned the daily portion of Chumash, she wasn't satisfied with simply following the basic storyline and Rashi's commentary. Each year, she used a different set of Chumashim with focuses on different mefarshim, deepening and enhancing her knowledge and appreciation of the Chumash with each cycle.

Although Luba passed away a few years ago, her model inspired me to upgrade my own learning of Chitas, may it be a zechus for her neshama.

**Names changed to protect privacy*

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