

HERE'S my STORY

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NIXON'S LIST

RABBI NAFTALI ESTULIN

I was born in Russia right after World War Two ended. It was very hard being Jewish under the Soviet regime; although we managed to practice Judaism, everything had to be secret, everything had to be done behind closed doors.

Thanks to the Rebbe's assistance, my grandparents got out in 1958 and came to Israel. The Rebbe had started to get Jews out around that time when, with Nikita Khrushchev as premier, the Soviets had become more sensitive to international pressure. The Rebbe did things quietly, without fanfare. He ran an entire Jewish underground under their noses and got away with it.

I left with my parents in 1968, but whereas they settled in Israel, I came to study at the Chabad Headquarters in Brooklyn.

While I was in *yeshivah* there, my parents came to New York for an audience with the Rebbe. I remember that my mother broke down in tears when she told the Rebbe that her sister couldn't get out of Russia. Her sister's husband had been in jail for eight years for teaching Torah, and my mother was certain there was no way that the KGB would let someone like that go. At the same time, he was unemployable as he could not find a job that would let him take off for Shabbat, and the family was in dire straits.

After hearing my mother out, the Rebbe said, "If it was up to the KGB, you would still be in Russia. So why are here? Because G-d made a miracle, and He took you out. It's true your sister needs a bigger miracle, but I ask you: To G-d, is a big miracle any harder than a small miracle? To Him, it makes no difference."

Six months later, my mother's sister and her whole family managed to emigrate!

After I got married in 1970, I started looking for a job — I badly wanted to be a Chabad emissary somewhere in the world. So I approached Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik, who runs the Chabad institutions in Milan, Italy, and he



agreed to hire me as a kosher inspector (*mashgiach*) in a restaurant he operated. This was conditional on the Rebbe's approval, of course.

Both of us wrote to the Rebbe but I got no answer, and I was wondering why until I heard that Rabbi Garelik did. The Rebbe wrote to him, "G-d didn't make such a miracle to take him out of Russia in order for him to become a kosher inspector etc.," implying that G-d had bigger plans for me.

What these plans were did not become apparent until I started working with Russian emigres in New York and then, in 1972, was offered a chance to do the same in Los Angeles. Rabbi Shlomo Cunin, the director of Chabad in California, was expecting an influx of Russian Jews, and he invited me to join him. I was eager to go, but Rabbi Cunin had asked for the Rebbe's approval several times but received no reply. I inquired with the Rebbe's office and learned that the Rebbe was waiting to hear from my wife — her whole family was in New York and the Rebbe wanted to make sure that she was happy to go. So she sent a letter, stating that she agreed to go. The Rebbe immediately gave us his approval for our move and off

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MY ENCOUNTER
with the **REBBE**

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1,500 videotaped interviews conducted to date. While we have done our utmost to authenticate these stories, they reflect the listener's recollection and interpretation of the Rebbe's words.



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we went.

In the beginning I worked with a small group of people, which quickly swelled to a couple hundred families. After about a year, I received instructions from the Rebbe to start collecting names of Jews still in Russia — I was to ask all the people I knew for the names of their relatives who wanted to get out. I did that, collecting a couple thousand names, and I sent them to the Rebbe.

A short while later, I found out what happened with this list.

In June of 1974, U.S. President Richard Nixon travelled to Moscow for talks with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, and he took that list along. When the Soviets denied that Jews wanted to leave — since nobody wanted to leave their “workers’ paradise” — Nixon produced the list. Shortly thereafter, thousands of Jews came pouring out of Russia, including the people on the list. Of course, many of them came to Los Angeles — first of all, California is beautiful, and this is also where their relatives lived.

As they started streaming in, I used to pick them up at the airport; I used to help them find jobs; I used to help them find apartments. Whatever was needed, I tried to provide it. I opened up a small place, filled it with books, and that became my center of operations on Fairfax Avenue in Los Angeles. By 1978, it was obvious that this was inadequate and that a proper synagogue was needed. With the Rebbe’s blessing, we opened such a place, our second location, on La Brea Avenue, which the Rebbe named “the Chabad Russian Synagogue.”

But this, too, soon became too small. All our programs were growing — in addition to the synagogue, we were also operating a day camp and a senior citizens’ center. A lot was on my shoulders, and I was under constant pressure. So I suppose it is no wonder that I got very sick — I just collapsed. I was so sick for a year that I couldn’t pick up my head.

During this time, I went to see the Rebbe, who said to me, “How can you be sick when there are so many Russian Jews coming?”

Somehow this revived me, and I realized that I needed to keep going. In fact, I needed to open a third place in West Hollywood, where most of the Russian emigres lived. But I had no money. So I wrote to the Rebbe asking for a blessing that I should be able to raise half-a-million dollars for the down-payment to set up a proper Chabad House. He answered me, “You will get more than you ask.”

Dedicated in honor of **Rabbi Estulin** רבי ע'י

By his children and grandchildren

You can help us record more testimonies by dedicating future editions of *Here's My Story*

Next thing you know a miracle happened. I was in the middle of running a day camp with four-hundred kids crammed into a small place when, at mealtime, an ordinary looking older man walked in. He started asking questions, and I explained to him about the camp and how we would serve the kids a hot meal for lunch. At that he got teary-eyed, because he had grown up in Czechoslovakia and often went hungry as a child. “But why are these kids squeezed in here like sardines?” he wanted to know. “Because we have no money for a bigger place,” I told him.

Right on the spot, he pledged to donate money for a new center. We went out looking together and found a large auto-repair shop that was for sale for two million dollars. He immediately wrote me a check for the deposit and promised me a total of half-a-million dollars for the down-payment. His wife had just passed away, and she had been very thrifty and saved up a lot of money, he said.

I was astonished, and I only wished that I had asked the Rebbe for a blessing for more!

But when the Rebbe said something, it always came true. Indeed, my wonderful donor — Mr. Harry Rubinfeld — actually donated eight-hundred thousand dollars, so the Rebbe was right when he said, “You will get more than you ask.”

Since 1972, Rabbi Naftali Estulin has served as the Rebbe's emissary to the Russian community of Los Angeles. He presently is the director of the Chabad Russian Immigrant Program and Synagogue, based in West Hollywood. He was interviewed in September 2011.

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב זוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5744 — 1983**, during the first *shluchim* convention, the Rebbe pointed out that the numerical value of the word *shliach* is the same as the word *sameach* — happy. When an emissary is happy about his mission he can be sure that he'll be successful.¹ 29 *Cheshvan*

1. Torat Menachem 5744 vol. 1 page 521



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