

HERE'S my STORY

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CLANDESTINE COOPERATION

MR. LOVA ELIAV



Lova converses with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the Knesset

In the late 1950s, at a time when the Iron Curtain was almost impenetrable, I served as the first secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Moscow. While officially I was playing a diplomatic role, I was actually tasked by the Israeli government with creating a link with the Jews trapped in the USSR.

During those harsh times, I and my colleagues at the embassy tried to contact Jews throughout the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union, meeting primarily in synagogues — wherever they existed — as well as in safe houses maintained by the Chabad underground. We realized, of course, that we were taking huge risks with our own safety and with the safety of those whom we met, because at that time the practice of Judaism was considered a nationalistic activity and therefore an act of rebellion against the Communist regime. Even to possess a Hebrew Bible or a Jewish prayer book was viewed as anti-Soviet. Why anti-Soviet? Because the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish prayer book both speak about the yearning for Zion. To yearn for Zion was to deny that the Communist state was a paradise on earth.

We, the Zionists of the Israeli Embassy, were indeed guilty of this crime. We did want the Jews of the USSR to identify with the Jewish nation. We did want these oppressed people to awaken to their right as Jews to return to their

ancestral homeland. And we knew that our work was illegal from the Soviet perspective. Still, even though it was dangerous, we persevered. We distributed thousands of miniature Jewish prayer books and miniature Hebrew bibles — so as to make them easier to hide — as well as other religious and non-religious articles, such as Jewish newspapers and calendars.

Our main job, wherever we went, was to connect with the local Jews. We had no idea exactly where they were, though we had reason to believe there were three to four million of them scattered throughout the Soviet Union. Wherever we went, we first tried to find the local synagogue. Unfortunately, most of them had been shut down, and the few that remained open were empty showplaces, intended to demonstrate to the world that the Soviet Union was not oppressive and respected the civil rights of ethnic minorities. Since these few synagogues had been infiltrated by KGB informants, most Jews feared being seen in them and losing their jobs, at best, or being sent to prison, at worst. Only a few elderly people, who had nothing left to fear, would still attend.

In our search to locate the Jews of the USSR, over and over again, we came across the Chabad underground movement. Like us, the Lubavitchers wanted the Jews of the USSR to connect with their Jewish identity — they wanted to keep the Jewish spark alive — although more in the religious sense than what we had in mind. Nonetheless, we worked hand-in-hand, although at a much greater risk for them because we could invoke diplomatic immunity if we were caught. Of course, we'd be thrown out of the country, but we would not be thrown in prison. That's exactly what would happen to the Chabad emissaries if they were caught.

This is why we were very careful not to expose them. We would contact them through intermediaries, seeking only to assist them in their work and provide the resources they needed.

After doing this for three years, I returned to Israel where I was directed by Shaul Avigur, the head of Nativ (the arm of the Israeli government behind our covert efforts in the USSR), to write a book about my experiences. This I did, and the result was *Between the Hammer and the Sickle*. Shaul Avigur also directed me to meet the man who led the Chabad underground movement in Russia. And this I also did — I went to New York to meet the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

My meeting with the Rebbe, which lasted many hours, took

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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.



continued from reverse

place in Yiddish. And I must say, first of all, that the Rebbe was a most impressive man —welcoming and very friendly — but also a very savvy underground leader. He first put me through a cross-examination that went something like this:

“Did you visit Tashkent?”

“Yes, I was in Tashkent.”

“Is it a big city?”

“Yes.”

“Are there Jews in Tashkent?”

“Yes, there are Jews in Tashkent.”

“Many Jews?”

“I think there are about thirty or forty thousand.”

“Do they have a synagogue?”

“Yes, they have two.”

“Did you attend services in Tashkent?”

“Yes, I did.”

“When?”

“Shabbat day.”

“Did they call you up to the Torah?”

“Yes.”

“When you were called up, did the cantor read the Torah well?”

I said, “He read it very well,” and I added, “He had a red beard.”

Now the Rebbe was pleased: “A red beard, and he read well!”

That was really the bit of information that the Rebbe was searching for. If I had met the cantor with the red beard, I had met Chabad’s contact in Tashkent. He asked me similar questions about cities across the entire Soviet map, until he was satisfied that I had been trusted by the Chabad underground.

I found his manner of questioning quite intriguing. He had acquired the information he needed, but it could never be repeated in a way that could expose any details to the wrong people.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust me — he did. But I believe he was taking appropriate precautionary measures, as the leader of a secret underground must.

After he had questioned me at length about the state of the synagogues and Jewish communities in various cities, he also asked me about the state of the Soviet Union in general. He was exceptionally well-informed about every aspect of life in the country — both economic and social — but nonetheless, he wanted to hear my assessment of the situation. He was curious about the double economy — the official economy and the black-market economy — and how that affected politics and life in general.

During that conversation I felt that I had found a quick path to the Rebbe’s heart and the Rebbe to mine. We both cared deeply about the fate of the Jews of the Soviet Union.

We both wanted to help these three or four million Jewish souls and to see them released from their oppression. To this extent our aims were completely identical, even if the Rebbe approached the situation from the religious perspective and I from the political perspective.

When our conversation was over, he blessed me in my new endeavor — which was to supervise the building of the new city of Arad in Israel — and I left with very pleasant feelings. Indeed, I considered it a great merit to have met him and spent that time with him.

Winner of the Israel Prize, Aryeh “Lova” Eliav (1921-2010) was an Israeli politician who held various government posts, including serving in the Knesset. He was interviewed in his home in Tel Aviv, Israel, in January of 2007. This story has previously been published in the book My Story.

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This week in...

> **5722 – 1962**, a group of students from Worcester, Massachusetts, brought a model *Mishkan* (tabernacle) which they had built to the Rebbe. The Rebbe addressed the students in English and commented that, “The *mishkan* that the Jews erected in the desert is now hidden and is waiting for the coming of Mashiach, when it will be revealed as part of the Third Temple. Then you will have the opportunity to compare your model with the original.”¹ 19 Sivan

1. Torat Menachem vol. 34 page 57

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