



R-L: Rabbi Yosef Rodal, Tina, Malki Rodal, Yitzchok Rodal, Tina's friend Dianna.



I N A

Pintele Yid Still Strong at 91

Rabbi Yosef Rodal // Chabad of RARA, Australia

It was a sultry day in the town of Jindabyne, a small village nestled in the foothills of Mt. Kosciuszko in New South Wales, Australia. As the sun's rays cast long shadows, the little party of seven chatted comfortably. Tina, the hostess, served homemade boiled chicken, exactly the way her grandmother used to make it back in Austria.

She glanced at her guests with pleasure. Dr. Phillip Klein, who had recently

retired in nearby Thredbo, had come with his wife Marina. Her friend Dianna sat nearby, ready to help. At the far end of the table I sat with my wife Malki and our one-year-old son Yitzchok. We had come to spend this Chanukah evening with the few Jewish locals.

Malki and I direct Chabad of RARA, the organization which travels throughout Rural and Regional Australia, connecting with Jewish people and arranging programs, holiday events, online education, home visits and more. Because the continent is so big, it takes a lot of planning and manpower to travel through thousands of kilometers to reach everyone, or as close to that goal as possible.

Chanukah is one of the busiest times of the year for Chabad of RARA. During the week of Chanukah we coordinated 14 events throughout the country. With teams of volunteers travelling from city to city, each night hosting an event in the area, there is a lot going on.

We had driven a long way, having hosted a Chanukah party the night before

in Albury-Wodonga, Victoria. The quaint town of Jyndabine is quite out of the way, but as Tina had been asking for a visit for a while, I figured that Chanukah was the perfect opportunity.

As the smell of the *latkes* warming in the oven wafted through the house, I asked Tina what had led her to request a visit. During a previous phone conversation,

Rabbi Rodal
affixes
mezuzahs to
Tina's doors.

91-year-old Tina had admitted to me that she was born Jewish, but had been a practicing Christian her entire life.

"Ah..." Tina said. "I am not even sure myself. I was and still am a devout Christian. About two years ago, around my 89th birthday, I suddenly felt stirrings deep within me, prodding me to reconnect to my Jewish faith. I fought these feelings strongly, to the point where I became suicidal and had to resort to medication to control my impulses. Eventually, I gave in to the stirrings inside me, and asked to connect to a Rabbi, and you called me back, but I am not sure what I want from you."

I asked Tina to share more about her life. Tina kept everyone spellbound with her courageous story.

Tina's mother had passed away when she was eight years old, and her grandmother had adopted her. Grandma Marie, as she called her, converted to Christianity and was shunned by her Jewish family, effectively barring her from *shtetl* life in Austria. So she packed up, took Tina with her, and settled in the





Tina and
Rabbi Rodal.



mountainous region on the border of Austria and Yugoslavia.

Tina has happy childhood memories of frolicking in the forest. She vividly recalls a family friend named Sigmund Freud paying visits to her house. She developed a relationship with Hans, a local schoolboy who was a few years her senior, and she secretly hoped that they would marry one day.

But abruptly her peaceful life was shattered. The war had reached her doorstep, and as a young girl of 15, her life would never be the same.

Grandma Marie passed away around this time, and Tina moved in with Mia, a friend from school. Mia's father was an outspoken communist, and was soon deported. Although Tina did not support communism, she was horrified by the Nazis and everything they stood for. Soon enough, she had an opportunity to do something about it.

The leader of the Austrian underground contacted her and convinced her that she would be the perfect person to smuggle people over the border to safety. Her appearance as a simple teenage girl, raised and living as a Christian, coupled with her intimate knowledge of the terrain, made her the ideal candidate.

Tina threw herself into underground work. She even stole her boyfriend Hans's gun in order to provide the underground with much-needed weapons. Hans, who had been promoted to chief officer of the SS in the region, told her that he had to break off their friendship for the safety of them both.

Already under suspicion, Tina was brought into SS headquarters for questioning. With an imperceptible nod, Hans indicated that she dare not show any sign of recognition. Tina understood and obeyed. Hans told her later that her quick thinking had saved her life.

Over the next few years, she smuggled over 70 people over the border, most of them Jews, along with other political prisoners. She couldn't risk taking more than two people at a time and had to make over 50 trips, guiding both night and day, hiding in caves like hunted animals. She married a Jewish man, Michael, and soon became pregnant. Still, throughout the pregnancy and even after the birth of their daughter, she continued doing her lifesaving work as a guide for unfortunate refugees escaping to freedom.

Many times she was almost caught, and she exhibited tremendous courage

On another occasion, she had no choice but to shoot an informer on his way to give her up to the authorities.

under pressure. Once a Nazi guard displayed interest in her while her charges were waiting for her outside. She promptly threw the Nazi into a vat of butter. On another occasion, she had no choice but to shoot an informer on his way to give her up to the authorities. She merely wounded him and didn't kill him, so the news got around and she had to desist from her underground activities for a while.

On one of her adventures, in the dead of winter, she was taking a young Jewish couple to freedom. Snaking through the frozen trees, she led them into her hideout, a small cave dug out

in the mountainside. The husband asked for her permission to light the small menorah that he had managed to take along with the rest of his meager possessions. She refused, as the light might attract unwanted attention.

The couple pleaded with her and promised to cover the flames. Finally she acquiesced. With heartfelt longing, the couple fulfilled the *mitzvah* and softly sang *Maoz Tzur*. This was one of Tina's only Jewish experiences.

Many miracles and unforgettable experiences later, the war was over. She eagerly awaited news of her husband Michael who had been sent to the front to fight against Germany. Unfortunately, his commanding officer came bearing the terrible news. Her husband had perished on the battlefield. All that she had left was his coat, which his comrade had salvaged.

Heartbroken, and still nursing her one-year-old daughter, Tina started rebuilding her life. She remarried, to a man who happened to be Jewish, and became pregnant a short while later.

Not long afterwards, her first husband returned from the dead. Michael had lent his coat to a freezing soldier, who then died on the battlefield.



Tina with
Mrs. Malki
Rodal,
holding
Yitzchok.



Rabbi Rodal with Tina and her son Fred.

Tina had to make a gut-wrenching decision. She decided to stay with her second partner, and divorced Michael. But alas, this too was not to last, as he demanded that Tina give up her daughter to her first husband. She refused, and this marriage too ended in divorce.

Now weighed down with two young children, Tina finally met her destined one. Arthur, who also was Jewish, respected her Christianity and felt that showing any signs of Judaism would only breed anti-Semitism. Together they had another three children, raising them as Christians. In search of a better life, they immigrated to Sydney, where they lived for the next 40 years.

After Arthur passed on, a series of unfortunate developments caused her to lose her income and home. Tina relocated to rural Jindabyne, where housing was more affordable and the climate reminded her of the Austrian mountains.

“So,” she concluded, “I still consider myself Christian, and have raised my children as such. It would be an affront to Grandma Marie to say that I am not. She was a devout Christian and raised me with much love. And therefore, as I said, I am not sure what a Rabbi can do for me.”

“First of all,” I replied, “you are a heroine of the highest order. The Talmud states that one who saves a single life is considered as if they have saved the entire world. How much more so when you have saved dozens, perhaps hundreds, of lives.”

Regarding her claim that she was a Christian, I explained that the Jewish soul is invincible. No action of ours in this world can sever our bond with G-d. Yet our connection ebbs and flows, like a flame, and this would account for Tina’s sudden stirrings of discontent.

Tina was quite interested in the theological discussion and soon the entire table was engrossed in heated yet respectful debate. Everyone sensed that it was a poignant moment.

On Malki’s suggestion, a *menorah* was set up.

“Would you light for me?” asked Tina. “I would like to participate in this *mitzvah*, but I do not feel able to perform it myself. Can you please have me in mind?”

The atmosphere was electric as I sang the *brachos* followed by *Maoz Tzur*. Tina’s eyes clouded with tears. After a few moments, she remarked how this moment had transported her back to the cave on that fateful night when she had experienced Chanukah for the first and only time. She insisted that we stay the night instead of checking into a motel as we usually did. We agreed on the condition that we could supply her with our “extra” kosher meat and cheese from Melbourne.

Dr. Klein, who had been a bit antagonistic at the onset of the evening, was quite affected by the experience. I think he was somewhat surprised to find us pleasant and polite, after all. He went so far as to offer his house for the next event that RARA would host in the area. He also invited Tina for a

Shabbos meal which they would make in her honor. To this end, we provided him with a few precious Shabbos Table Guides from New York. We bid farewell, promising to keep in touch, a promise which has since been fulfilled and will continue to be fulfilled, G-d willing.

In the morning, Tina was feeling exceptionally happy and peaceful. There was a spring in her step as she greeted us. She bustled around the kitchen, delighting in our company and asking all sorts of questions about Judaism.

Her son Fred stopped by from the other side of town to check on her. It happened to be his 72nd birthday. Unsurprisingly, he told me that he did not identify as Jewish.

After a bit of convincing, Fred rolled up his sleeve and put on *tefillin*, effectively celebrating his bar mitzvah. To mark the occasion, all present ate half-stale donuts and chocolate coins from the night before. The table, resplendent with colorful Chanukah candles and the remains of last night's feast, seemed to join in the jubilation of this bar mitzvah being held 59 years after Fred's 13th birthday.

Fred departed, and upon Tina's insistence, we stayed for a few more hours until that night's event in Wollongong. We were able to record some of her war experiences, which the family greatly appreciated. Her own children had never heard her talk about her past and only knew sketchy details.

Tina stepped out for a moment to answer the telephone. Speaking loudly, her voice could be heard in the other room.

"Regina, you missed it!" we heard her say. "Last night was the best night of my life! I now know that my 'Jewishism' is who I am. I am sure that Grandma Marie is looking down from heaven and smiling at my choice."

We were dumbfounded. After just one night with Chabad, Tina was rejecting the beliefs she had held dear her entire life. She was now embracing what had been lying dormant all those years. Her essence, her *pintele Yid*, had won out.

After putting up a *mezuzah* and leaving

lots of Jewish reading material, we turned our attention to a sensitive topic. What were Tina's plans for after death? Her current will stipulated cremation, as the most cost-effective option. Now, after hearing about the importance of Jewish burial, she wanted to change it. Her only reservation was the prohibitive cost. I promised to cover the expenses, and to arrange for *kaddish* to be recited after her as well.

There was a tearful farewell, and then we had to leave as we had an appointment to meet a Jewish lady in Cooma, some two hours away.

In the months since, arrangements have been put in place for Tina's will to reflect her Jewish views, and Tina has officially reclaimed her "Jewishism," as she calls it. Many of her friends have cut off all ties with her as a result, but this does not deter her.

She has called me or my wife many times since our meeting, to discuss a wide spectrum of topics ranging from gefilte fish recipes to advice on sleeping better. She constantly suggests that we take a skiing vacation in Jindabyne, of course staying in her house.

Dr. Klein hosted a wonderful Shabbos meal together with Tina and her daughter, and remains close to Tina.

We have since gotten in touch with Tina's children and grandchildren. While most of Tina's descendants still insist on their fervent belief in Christianity, this story highlights the power of the Jewish soul: a *neshamah* can never be extinguished. It may be hidden, dormant and covered, even for nine decades, but it always flickers in the heart of a Jew, waiting to be ignited. ■

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Rabbi Yosef Rodal (holding Yitzchok) and Mrs. Malki Rodal (holding Shmuel Tuvia, born after this story).

