



A VISIT WITH THE REBBETZIN

Mrs. Devora Caytak

“MY ENCOUNTER WITH THE REBBE” is an oral history project which films individuals who met the Rebbe in person or corresponded with him. In these films they tell of their experiences with the Rebbe that touched them, impacted their lives and, in turn, caused them to inspire others. Every week My Encounter With the Rebbe publishes a story of the Rebbe, called Here’s My Story, for your Shabbos table reading pleasure and inspiration. To receive it weekly via email in time for Shabbos, please email mystory@jemia.org. Tell JEM you read about it in the N’shei Chabad Newsletter. To get previous Here’s My Story editions, visit myencounterblog.com. NCN thanks JEM’s My Encounter With the Rebbe team for permission to publish this story in honor of the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka whose yahrtzeit is 22 Shvat. - Ed.

I was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to a Conservative Jewish family. I was educated in public schools, though I also went to Hebrew school. In 1976, when I was 17 years old, I went on a trip to Israel that was sponsored by the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Conservative seminary in New York.

While in Israel, I stayed on a religious *kibbutz* — because there were no Conservative *kibbutzim* — and there I started keeping Shabbos and learning more about Judaism. After four months of this, I returned home and I wanted to continue keeping Shabbos.

So who did I call? Chabad, of course. I called Rabbi Moshe Feller, the Chabad emissary in S. Paul and Minneapolis, and I said, “I just came back from Israel and I’d like to come for Shabbos.” He was elated and he immediately said, “Come and bring all your friends!” I had no friends to bring, because my friends were not interested in keeping Shabbos, so I went alone.

It was a wonderful experience, and even after I enrolled at the University of Minnesota that fall, I kept going for Shabbos to various Chabad families in S. Paul. The following summer — this was the summer of 1977 — I decided that I wanted to learn Torah full-time at Machon Chana, the Chabad seminary for young women in New York.

My parents were against this, and they were very upset that I insisted on going to Machon Chana.

My siblings were also upset, my relatives were upset, and my friends basically dropped me. So I arrived in Crown Heights feeling very much alone.

One day, I was sitting in the dorm at Machon Chana feeling like I had no one to talk to, and the thought entered my mind, “I could talk to the Rebbetzin.”

I shared this thought with two of my roommates from the dorm, and together we wrote a letter to the Rebbetzin. We said that we knew we were not worthy but, if possible, we would like to meet with her. We took this letter to the Rebbe’s and Rebbetzin’s house on President Street, put it through the mail slot, and ran away as fast as we could, not sure what was going to happen.

A few days later, Mrs. Mera Galperin, the cook at Machon Chana, came up to me and, in a low voice, asked, “Did you write a letter to the Rebbetzin?”

My heart started to pound, and

was shocked when she continued: “The Rebbetzin would like to meet you and your friends.”

The following week, my two dormmates and I went with Mrs. Galperin to the Rebbe’s house. We rang the doorbell and this most majestic, elegant, very small woman opened the door. This was Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka! I remember she was wearing a beautiful light-colored dress, a sheitel and a light-colored scarf over her sheitel.

She welcomed us in and took our coats and brought us into the dining room, which was set with fine china and crystal, as if she was expecting royal visitors. We sat down, and she offered us cookies and fruit juice. I could tell that she had put a lot of effort into making us feel very welcome and that a lot of preparation had taken place for our visit.

She asked us our names and then she asked us some questions. It would have been natural for her to ask us to relate our personal sto-

It would have been natural for her to ask us to relate our personal stories—because we all came from non-religious homes—but she didn’t pry like that.

I thought, “Oh no, I’m going to be asked to leave Machon Chana. They’re going to kick me out, and I’ve been here only three months!”

I admitted that I had done it. I

ries—because we all came from non-religious homes—but she didn’t pry like that. Instead, she asked us each in turn what we liked to do, what our hobbies were, what kind

of music we liked.

She also asked us if we spoke Yiddish. And she told us that it was very important to learn Yiddish and to speak Yiddish, because if you know Yiddish, wherever you go in the world you are able to communicate with other Jewish people.

Mrs. Galperin had brought some photos of the recent wedding of a Machon Chana girl, and the Rebbetzin spent a lot of time looking at each picture very carefully. You could tell that she was just thrilled that this girl had gotten married, and she got a lot of pleasure from looking at the photos.

After we finished our fruit juice and cookies, she went to get a *siddur*, so that we could recite the after-blessing. Later I learned that this was her father's *siddur* — this very worn *siddur* had belonged to the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, of righteous memory.

Although we had been there for over

an hour, she never dismissed us. She never said, "It's been nice meeting you girls. Thank you so much for coming." It was just that after we said the blessing, the natural thing was to get up and go.

As we were going out, she showed us a beautiful golden globe that the women of Chabad had given her — it had diamonds studs where there were Chabad centers throughout the world. And you could tell that it was very precious to her, and that was the one thing that she wanted to show us.

As she said good-bye, she asked us not to tell anybody about the visit. I think she probably did not want to get inundated, but it made the visit all the more special for me. The whole visit really lifted my spirits. While previously I had felt very alone, I now felt elevated by the experience, and I resolved to remain in Crown Heights.

Over the years, as I reflected on it, I really came to appreciate the brilliance

and the wisdom of the Rebbetzin. I mean, the average person would have said, "What's your story? Tell me how you became religious. How did you end up at Machon Chana?" But, instead, the Rebbetzin asked us what we liked to do.

She asked us what music we liked and she treated us with so much respect and sensitivity. Her example became a lesson for me how to act when you first meet people. During that visit she fortified me, and showed me how to deal with other people. And that certainly helps us on our Shlichus today. ■

Mrs. Devora Caytak has served as a Chabad emissary in Ottawa, Canada, for 33 years, together with her husband Rabbi Yosef Caytak. Their Chabad House is named after Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka. Mrs. Caytak was interviewed in the My Encounter studio in New York in January of 2014.

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