



*Tzippy
Remembers
When...*

Our Humble Beginnings Part II

TZIPPY CLAPMAN

Williamsburg in the 1930s had a large Jewish community, the majority of which came to this country in the early 1900s. They lived through the Depression years from 1929 to 1939 and, unfortunately, their *Yiddishkeit* did not always stay strong. Dire poverty was rampant and many caved to the pressure to work on Shabbos. By the '40s and '50s, in the aftermath of the Depression years, about half the Jews in Williamsburg had abandoned their *Yiddishkeit* and about half still held strong.

The Williamsburg Yidden who held strong *davened* in *shtieblach* that were guided by Rebbes from different Jewish towns in Europe, and the “shul” was simply the largest room in the Rebbe’s house. There were many such shuls throughout many Brooklyn neighborhoods, not only Williamsburg. Crown Heights had them too: the Spinker shul, the Novominsker shul, the Karestierer shul, and many more.

The Rebbes who led these *shtieblach* took an interest in their congregants’ welfare and helped them physically,



NCN extends special thanks to *Hamodia* and Mrs. Esther Horowitz for sharing with us these photos of Jewish life in Williamsburg in the 1940s.

emotionally, and spiritually. When they first moved to Williamsburg from the Lower East Side, my parents *davened* in such a *shtiebel* led by Rabbi Yissachar Berish Rubin, the Dolina Rebbe, *zy”a*. On Shabbos after *davening* his wife would serve a delicious hot *kiddush*. My brother and I would accompany our father to shul on Shabbos mornings; we loved playing with the Rebbe’s children, who encouraged us to join them in running around their house and even jumping on the beds! They were happy, friendly children who always shared their taffies with us.

There were several similar *shtieblach* around the neighborhood, such as one across the street from our home called the Gerrer *shtiebel*, and another called the *shtiebel* of the *Maluchim*—an offshoot of Lubavitch that went in its own direction. These *shtieblach* helped all the *frum* Yidden and supported their religious needs.

There were also some larger neighborhood shuls throughout the area, such as the Klymer Street shul and the Yeshivah Torah Vodaas shul, which was primarily for

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the parents and staff of the boys' yeshiva. There were others such as the Young Israel of Williamsburg and the Tzelemer *shtiebel*, which was run by the Tzelemer Rebbe who came from Europe to guide and care for his townspeople. There was also the Khal Adas Yera'ım shul; its members were Austrian Jews whose Rebbe led the shul and cared for its members.

These small community shuls housed both very religious Yidden who wore their European garb, untrimmed beards, and long *peyos*, as well as clean-shaven more American-garbed members, but they all *davened* together in one *minyān*.

The community had *mikva'os* for both men and women in those early years, as well as several bakeries that made handmade *matzah*, some of which are still in business today.

In the early 1940s, Williamsburg housed a combination of many unaffiliated Yidden, some Modern Orthodox Yidden, and a handful of ultra-Orthodox Yidden, all living together in one community.

Then the Holocaust ended in 1946 and soon after that, in the last few years of the 1940s, everything changed.

The survivors from the Holocaust arrived in great numbers to Williamsburg. This was orchestrated mainly by *Satmar chassidim*, and very soon every unrented apartment was immediately occupied by a new Satmar family. Within a period of a few years, the numbers of *chassidim* far outnumbered the rest of the Jewish population, and the unaffiliated Yidden now felt very displaced in Williamsburg. The first Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, *zy"ā*, wanted to insulate his *chassidim* from any American or secular influences, so he warned his *chassidim* not to mingle with or befriend the more Americanized Jews. The Satmar Rebbe wanted to keep them from going astray due to what he perceived as their vulnerability in this new land. The old Williamsburg residents felt unwanted by these new neighbors, many

of whom would not socialize with their less religious Jewish neighbors.

Satmar leaders procured jobs for their *chassidim* in Satmar-owned businesses, mostly in Manhattan, and the Rebbe had private buses taking them to and from their jobs in order to keep them from mingling with their American neighbors on the subways or buses.

Immediately upon their arrival in America, the Satmar *chassidim* put their boys into their own overnight-organized yeshivos so as not to mix with the more American-dressed Torah Vodaas boys who did not have *lynge peyos* and whose teachers did not all have beards.

Chalav Yisroel milk companies, *shomer Shabbos* bakeries, and *glatt kosher* butcher stores popped up all over Williamsburg with the arrival of the *chassidim*. These new shops changed the community even more.

The fact that the new, *chassidish*-looking neighborhood wasn't welcoming to the unaffiliated Jews caused them to move out in droves. They moved to Flatbush, Prospect Park, and Queens. Once these Jews moved out, the businesses that catered to them closed down or moved out as well.

The demographic change did not dramatically affect the religious families at first; more kosher stores and *chalav Yisroel* options were fine with them, but their new neighbors kept very much to themselves and spoke mostly Hungarian.

Eventually this made the community uninviting for the *frum* families, and they too started moving to places like Flatbush, Boro Park, and East Flatbush, which already had *frum* boys' and girls' schools. Torah Vodaas soon moved out of Williamsburg, and so did the majority of non-*chassidish* religious American Yidden.

Williamsburg had a YMHA (Young Men's Hebrew Association) and a YWHA (Young Women's Hebrew Association) located in the heart of Williamsburg, on Bedford and Rodney Streets. This was a social activity



building for American Jewish families from the 1940s through the 1970s. The four-story building housed a Jewish day care for working mothers (in the 1940s women did not have jobs outside the home, but in the 1970s many did), daily social activities for the elderly, and kosher meals for anyone who needed them. For many Jewish seniors, this was their haven, and it filled their needs. There was a large gym in the basement for sports and games, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool with separate hours for men and women. The YMHA and the YWHA (we called them both “the Y”) gave us Jewish kids lots of fun activities and events to look forward to, like Chanukah parties and Shushan Purim carnivals, with costume contests and prizes. The *chassidim* did not take part in the events offered by the Y whatsoever. All of my friends and my brother’s *frum* yeshivah friends did take advantage of the Y and we gratefully renewed our membership each year.

It wasn’t only Satmar that moved from Europe to Williamsburg. Various *chassidish* groups, mostly Holocaust survivors, moved there as well. I remember Klausenberg,



Gerr, Bobov, and countless other *chassidische* survivors. The Satmar Rebbe paved the way for these *chassidim* to come, as now there were yeshivos and girls’ schools, and there was also *kashrus* that was proper and acceptable even to their high standards.

The unaffiliated elderly people of Williamsburg, those whose children lived in other places far away, had no option but to move to more hospitable neighborhoods, where the Jews were more similar to them. They never became friendly with the *chassidische* newcomers, who treated them like they were *goyim* and wanted little or nothing to do with them. Though they were very set in their ways and moving was stressful both physically and emotionally, they felt they had to do it if they could, and most did—some just couldn’t manage it financially.

It was the *frum* American Jews who cared for the needs of these homebound seniors. I have written previously about my *tante* Shaina Esther,* who would go from house to house looking after these men and women to make sure they had their basic necessities. She would go

* To read the whole story, please visit nsheichabadnewsletter.com/archives/clapman. The title of the article is Unforgettable Tanta Shaina Esther.

shopping for them or accompany them to appointments and pick up their medications for them. *Baruch Hashem*, she and others like her were there for the elderly and alone who couldn't follow their families and friends to more hospitable neighborhoods.

Some very prominent *shomer Shabbos* families that survived the Depression years and became giants of world Jewry lived in Williamsburg. We had the famous Rabbi Chaim Gelb, who raised a large family imbued with Torah and *chessed*. He would sit on the street corner for hours collecting *tzedakah* which he used to support families in great need. We had the famous Belsky family, that went through the Depression and came out intact in their *Yiddishkeit* and went on to produce generations of Torah giants. On our block lived a *shomer Shabbos* lawyer, the father of Chabad *shliach* Rabbi Shmuel Lew from England. He lived directly across the street from us and was the lawyer for my parents' real estate business. He and his wife raised fine, good, *frum* children. There were many families from Williamsburg that became Lubavitchers, and their children all married Lubavitchers, such as the Blesofsky family, the Zirkind family, and the Francois family.

My family adapted very well to the transformation of our community. My parents had many friends and family members in the area who shared our circumstances. The only major change was to send my brother to another boys' yeshiva out of the neighborhood. My brother went to Torah Vodaas until eighth grade, and then to another boys' school in Manhattan.

The Frierdiker Rebbe, *zy"ta*, was overjoyed by the *chassidische* Satmar Yidden arriving from Europe, and he was very happy with their resourcefulness at opening *kashrus* companies and improving the standards of *kashrus* in America. The Frierdiker Rebbe said (paraphrased), "Let them improve *kashrus* in America, and Chabad will get lots of Yidden to keep these higher standards. Let them build new *mikva'os*, and Chabad will get lots of Yidden to keep *taharas hamishpachah*."

It was the *chassidim* of Williamsburg who made *tzniusdik* clothing available and acceptable for women and girls and caused hair covering for married women to become more common and acceptable in the United States. The *chassidim* of Williamsburg and their Rebbes no doubt improved many Torah observances in "the new country," and the effects of those improvements are felt even today. ❧

TZIPPY CLAPMAN, RN, MS, FNP, lives in Crown Heights with her husband, Rabbi Yehuda Clapman, a certified *sofer*. Formerly a NICU nurse and now a provider in school-based clinics, Tzippy has written extensively for the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*, always with the goal of convincing parents of the supreme importance of creating warm, happy, *Yiddishe* memories for their children. Tzippy's sense of humor, her sincerity, and her clarity about *Yiddishe* values have changed lives for the better in the gentlest way possible. This is the 42nd installment of "Tzippy Remembers When..."



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