

My Memories

BY ESTHER STERNBERG

As told to Rishe Deitsch



Rebbetzin Chaya Moussia Schneersohn

On the Shabbos marking the Rebbetzin's first Yahrzeit, 19 years ago, the Rebbe described her passing from our midst by saying "...there was a fire, a G-dly flame, and her neshomoh rose up in the fire, and spirals higher and higher, especially since when she was a neshomoh b'guf, we speak of a Tzidkoniuss as well as the daughter of the Frieddiker Rebbe, Nest dorainu..."

Mrs. Esther Sternberg made it crystal clear that she is not the one to write an article summing up the Rebbetzin Chaya Moussia zt"l. She felt that whatever she would say about the Rebbetzin in an article—describing her greatness and her role as our Rebbetzin—would not do her justice and might, chas v'sholom, only detract

Still, Mrs. Sternberg is one of very few people who had a personal relationship with the Rebbetzin which was rooted in the history of her father, Reb Zalman Gurary z"l. The Gurary family had been close to the Rebbeim from the times of the Alter Rebbe. When Reb Zalman lost his father at the age of eight, his mother was already older and not in good health. At that point, he became part of the Frieddiker Rebbe's household and remained extremely close with the Rebbetzin throughout her life. In the spirit of yehachai yiten el libo [and the living shall take to heart],

Mrs. Sternberg did agree, albeit reluctantly, to share some stories from her own life that highlight the Rebbetzin's devotion, sensitivity and great kindness. We are deeply grateful to her for that. —The Editors



1958

I was 14 years old, and it was Shemini Atzeres, which that year fell on Shabbos. Early in the morning, I heard an unfamiliar man's voice coming from my parents' bedroom. It was Dr. Marritt, telling my father, Reb Zalman Gurary, that he had a large kidney stone causing a blockage, that it was a life threatening situation, and that he had to go to the hospital immediately. My father replied that he would do no such thing without the Rebbe's consent. But at 8:00 in the morning, on Shabbos Shemini Atzeres, how do you reach the Rebbe?

Then my father noticed me standing there. "Esther, you go to the Rebbe's house and ask if I should go to the hospital."

I really did not want to go. In fact, I was terrified to go. But I was also terrified that my father was not listening to the doctor who was telling him how seriously ill he was. My older brother and I went to the home of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin.

I knocked at the front door, at the back door, then at the front door again, but there was no answer. My brother suggested that since our father was so sick that in the doctor's opinion it was a matter of *sakonas nefoshos*, I should ring the doorbell. Afraid for my father's life, I did that. Very soon the Rebbetzin Chaya Moussia Schneersohn, daughter of the Frierdiker Rebbe, wife of the Rebbe, came downstairs and opened the front door. It was obvious that she had been asleep, and I felt embarrassed to have woken her, but I tried to do my Shlichus:

"I am Esther Gurary, and my father won't go to the hospital unless the Rebbe tells him to..." and I told her briefly, in Yiddish, whatever I knew of my father's condition. (We always spoke with each other in Yiddish.)

"I will ask my husband," replied the Rebbetzin. And she went upstairs.

She soon returned, and said, "My husband said to ask Dr. Seligson."

"But we already have a doctor there, Dr. Marritt, and he said my father should go. I am so sorry to bother you like this—"

The Rebbetzin assured me that it was no trouble at all, went back upstairs, and came back down. "My husband said, 'If so, he should go to the hospital.'"

I apologized again at having woken her and then having made her go back and forth so many times. She made light of any discomfort to herself, and I went home and gave over the Rebbe's answer.

But my father still would not go. He made me give over exactly what had been said, omitting nothing, and after he heard, he wanted Dr. Seligson to come see him.

Dr. Seligson came and examined my father. He advised him to go to the hospital, yes, but to wait until Shabbos was over so he would only be *mechalel* Yom Tov, and not be *mechalel* Shabbos too. During the next few hours, while it was still Shabbos, the kidney stone passed, the danger lifted, and my father did not wind up having to go to the hospital at

all.

A day or two later the Rebbetzin called my mother, Rebbetzin Chava Gurary z"l, to ask how my father was. Among other things, she said, "I was so happy to meet your daughter." Not a word about how much I had disturbed her and made her run up and down the stairs three times.

This was the first time I personally experienced the way the Rebbetzin would fully understand the discomfort and guilt a person felt at troubling her, and would do her utmost to minimize those uncomfortable emotions.

1962

My father was ill again, this time with a post-surgical kidney infection. The infection was caused by a strain of bacteria which doctors could not identify. He had a raging fever and the surgical wound would not heal.

At 17, and the only daughter, I spent the nights in the hospital with my father, and my mother spent the days.

One day I was home alone when the phone rang.

Me: Hello!

Caller: Who is this?

Me: Esther. Who is this?

Caller: Schneersohn.

Now, a woman named Rebbetzin Schneersohn had recently moved into Crown Heights from Newark, New Jersey. My mother had mentioned to me a few times that she wanted to make sure to properly welcome this woman into Crown Heights, but with my father in the hospital, she had not been able to do so yet. So I just assumed that this was Rebbetzin Schneersohn from Newark calling.

Me: Rebbetzin Schneersohn, welcome to Crown Heights!

Caller: Thank you.

Me: I hope you will be happy and comfortable here!

Caller: Thank you.

Me: My mother is planning to bake a cake and bring it over as soon as my father feels better!

Caller: I am calling to find out how your father is.

Me: Oh, Boruch Hashem, Boruch Hashem!

Caller: So the doctors are satisfied?

Me: Oh, yes, Boruch Hashem.

Caller: So he is coming home soon, then?

Me: Im Yirtzeh Hashem! Rebbetzin, again, welcome to Crown Heights, and I know my mother is looking forward to visiting with you...

There were a few more questions, which I answered as benignly as before. We hung up and about two minutes later, the phone rang again. It was my cousin, Mrs. Tema Gurary, with whom the Rebbetzin spoke very frequently.

Tema: Esther, did you just get a call?

Me: Yes, Rebbetzin Schneersohn from Newark called my mother, but how did you know?

Tema: It was Rebbetzin Moussia who called. She wonders if you know what is going on with your father. He is seriously ill in the hospital and you made light of it.

Me: Oy, vey! I thought it was a stranger. I thought it was Rebbetzin Schneersohn from—

Tema: I think you should call back the Rebbetzin, apologize, and tell her the truth about your father's condition.

I immediately did as Tema suggested. During this conversation, the Rebbetzin asked me about every detail of my father's condition, and was very upset to hear how serious it really was. She wanted me to call her every morning to report how the night had gone.

I protested. "Rebbetzin! I leave the hospital at 7 a.m. I can't call you that early!" But she insisted that I could and should. In fact, she made me promise I would, and so I did.

Unfortunately, for a long time I had nothing good to report. It took seven weeks before the infection healed.

One morning when I called, the Rebbetzin asked me, "Esther, do you go straight from a night in the hospital to seminary? What about breakfast?"

I told her that there was no food at the hospital and that I didn't have time to go home before seminary. I went straight from the hospital to seminary and, I assured her, I could always find something to eat there. This did not satisfy the Rebbetzin. She wanted me to have something after my long night at the hospital and she asked, "Not even a drink of orange juice, or grapefruit juice?" I had to admit, no, not even that. But I kept insisting I was fine waiting to eat at school – and I was! But— "Promise me you will eat as soon as you get to school." I promised.

The next morning when I called the Rebbetzin at 7 a.m. with my report (which saddened her), she told me, "I found out there is a store between Mt. Sinai Hospital and the subway station that sells Tropicana orange juice. Here is the address of the store. Promise me you will stop and buy a drink on your way to the train."

How did she find out about that little store? Whether she drove there in her car, or sent someone, or made calls, I do not know. But it seems that my drink of orange juice after a night in the hospital was important to the Rebbetzin.

1963

I was getting married soon, and all the wedding gowns in the stores were very *untzniusdik*. Rather than buy and alter, we decided to make a gown. So I ordered a snow white wedding gown and a veil with lots of tulle.

One Friday night, I was sick – so sick that I could not come to the table. But I overheard the talk at the dining room table. My father was telling my mother, "Esther cannot wear white to the wedding."

Despite my fever, I jumped out of bed. "What??!! I

already ordered the gown! Why can't I wear white? And what other color would I wear?"

My parents sent me back to bed.

After Shabbos, and after I recovered, Rebbetzin Chaya Moussia told me to come to her house and she would tell me all the correct *minhagim* to follow with regard to the wedding. And so I went over to the house, and I heard.

She explained to me that her father, the Frierdiker Rebbe, said that for a bride to wear a tiara, and to wear white, and to wear tulle – these are not our way. The Rebbetzin concluded, "And remember, the *badeken* should take place on the kallah's bare head. She should not be wearing anything on her head before *badeken*."

She showed me pictures of her own wedding, in an album, to illustrate the right way things should be done.

The Rebbetzin had worn three different gowns at her wedding; light blue, silver lace, and beige.

She had worn one at her *kabolas ponim* and *chuppah*, one at the reception following the *chuppah*, and another for the *seudoh*, which took place at midnight. She showed me pictures of these gowns in her album, but of course all the photos were black and white, so I can't be sure which color she wore when.

Rebbetzin: You must not wear white to your wedding.

Me: But I ordered it already!

Rebbetzin: You ordered it, but they probably didn't make it yet. They can still stop the order. I think ice pink or ice blue would look very nice on you. And if you ask for some extra material and some extra lace, we can make you a veil out of the same material as the gown, with no tulle and no tiara.

We were not finished. After dropping this bombshell, the Rebbetzin now wanted to tell me other *minhagim* from her father, the Frierdiker Rebbe.

She told me that I should be escorted to the *chuppah* by my parents, and my groom should be escorted by his parents.

"My father did not want me to trip, and he held my arm tightly," said the Rebbetzin. "I can still feel my father's arm on mine as he escorted me, heavily veiled, down the steps of the yeshivah building to the courtyard where the *chuppah* was to be held," she concluded with a soft smile.

The *Sefer Haminhagim* says to do differently than what the Rebbetzin was telling me. So my father asked the Rebbe what to do. The Rebbe said to follow all *minhagim* according to the Rebbetzin's instructions.

My father mistakenly understood that the kallah's bridal headpiece comes off before the *badeken*, so I wore a veil which was removed a few minutes before *badeken*. It later was made clear to us (and this was followed at all of our children's weddings) that there was to be nothing at all on the bride's head prior to the *badeken*. At *badeken*, the *dektuch* was to be placed over her face. After the *chuppah*, the kallah was to cover her hair completely, with a full *shaitel*, or with a full *shaitel* and a piece of fabric or lace on top. The Rebbetzin said that after her *chuppah*, she had put on a very beautiful, ornate head covering adorned with lace and tulle.

that completely covered her hair, but that that was in those days, and as for me, I should put on the shaitel right after the chuppah. And if I wanted to, I could put a piece of lace or other material over the shaitel. She designed one for me and I wore it at my wedding.

One week before my wedding, I went into yechidus with my parents, as was customary. The Rebbe said to my father, in Yiddish, "I know you are being very careful with the minhagim for the wedding, but what are you doing about the kallah's yiras shomayim?"

The Rebbe gave this directive: "At the very least, from now until the wedding, she should not be involved in gashmiusdike things, but she should immerse herself in ruchnius."

Even though there were some basic errands I hadn't attended to yet, we let other people do them for me while I learned a seder limud set out for me by my father.



The home of the Rebbe and Rebbetzin on President Street, in Crown Heights.

1981

I was expecting my ninth child. My father was very nervous because I was scheduled to give birth by Cesarean section. He was so nervous that even though he was in Europe, he planned to come back before the birth, and when the Rebbe told my father to go to Eretz Yisroel on a Shlichus, he replied with a rhetorical question — How

could he leave his only daughter before her surgery?

The Rebbe told my father, "According to the Shulchan Aruch, there is nothing you can do for your daughter, so go to Eretz Yisroel and be matzliach." Of course my father packed his bags and went.

The Rebbetzin took upon herself to check on me and to monitor my recuperation. And, indeed, she called me every day that I was in the hospital, and wanted to know details, including how much pain I was having. The Rebbetzin also checked with my daughters who were taking care of the household in my absence. One time when she called, my daughter Suri, then 17, was in the house. After identifying herself ("Dos iz Schneersohn foon President Street"), and wishing mazel tov, the Rebbetzin proceeded to check on things at home.

Rebbetzin: Who am I talking to?

Suri: This is Suri.

Rebbetzin: Suri, how are you managing without your

mother there?

Suri: I am managing fine. Boruch Hashem! Thank you!

Rebbetzin: Are you preparing supper for the younger children?

Suri: Yes, I am.

Rebbetzin: What did you prepare for tonight?

Suri (embarrassed): Umm... well... just hot dogs.

Rebbetzin: What a wonderful idea, children love it and it is easy to make.

Once again, the Rebbetzin did her best (and succeeded) to put someone at ease in a potentially uncomfortable situation.

1983

During the engagement of my oldest daughter, Rivky, to Aaron Slonim, the Rebbetzin inquired of my father whether we were carefully following the minhagim which she had told us about for the wedding. My father assured her that we were. During that conversation, she corrected our earlier misunderstanding about the hair being covered before badeken.

Rebbetzin: Remember, nothing on the kallah's head until the badeken.

Reb Zalman Gurary: Yes! At my daughter's wedding, we removed her veil a few minutes before the badeken.

Rebbetzin: No — the FIRST THING that goes on the kallah's head at the wedding is the dektuch.

Later, I complained to my father. I said, "I can't do this to my daughter! A pink gown, no veil, she'll be so different!" I had not discussed any of this with Rivky. I just assumed she would not want to be different. And, in fact, when I told Rivky about the minhagim, she was upset.

Realizing this, my father called the Rebbetzin and asked her to speak with Rivky directly. That evening, my father called the Rebbetzin, spoke with her, and then called Rivky to the phone. Rivky was completely unprepared to talk with the Rebbetzin, but —

Rebbetzin: I hear you are having problems keeping the minhagim.

Rivky (shocked): Umm... I don't have any problem with keeping the minhagim.

Rebbetzin: But I heard that you are upset!

Rivky: Well, the truth is, I don't want to be different from everyone else.

Rebbetzin: You should know that it is a big zchus to keep the minhagim.

(LONG PAUSE)

Rebbetzin: Ess iz moderne tzu zein andersh. (It's very modern to be a non-conformist.)

Rivky: Okay.

Rebbetzin: After the



chuppah, put on your shaitel and any headpiece you want, but nothing made out of tulle, and only after the chuppah. And the dress must not be white.

Her implication, or maybe her unspoken challenge ("so you'll be a non-conformist!"), appealed to my Rivky's spirit and melted her resistance.

The Rebbetzin was emphatic that these *minhagim* should be kept with great care. We have kept them at all the weddings of our sons, daughters, and grandchildren.

1985

In the summer of 1983, the Rebbetzin fell and fractured her hip. For various reasons, she could not undergo hip replacement surgery which usually restores the patient to health relatively rapidly. Instead, she was bedridden and in tremendous pain for a long time, until the hip healed.

The Rebbetzin came home from the hospital to a staff of wonderfully dedicated round-the-clock nurses. It was my zchus to be the one responsible for managing the shifts of the various nurses, and to find replacements when one couldn't make it or needed time off. (Unfortunately, nurses also call in sick sometimes.)

Throughout this time, I assumed the Rebbetzin did not know I was involved, because the Rebbetzin used to get upset with me if she thought I was "too busy" with her (as if such a thing could be possible). She always felt that my children needed me more than she did, and I should be home with them and not attending to her. That is why even when she was hospitalized, I would go – but I would hide, and not let her see me, because she would just send me straight home to my children if she saw me at the hospital.

Anyway, after the Rebbetzin's hip fracture, I arranged the nurses' shifts. One Sunday in 1985, on a rainy, windy night, my phone rang. I was very surprised to hear the Rebbetzin's voice. We had not spoken since her accident. Uncharacteristically, she got straight to the point. After apologizing for bothering me, she said, "I need a very big favor." Naturally, my reply was, "Of course, Rebbetzin, anything for you!"

She went on to say that her health was very much improved, and she really did not need round-the-clock nurses anymore, but that her husband, the Rebbe, insisted. Tonight, the nurse who was due to come had not arrived, and: "My husband will not go to 770 unless there is a nurse with me."

She went on to say very understandingly that she figured the nursing agency was probably closed on Sundays, and certainly at night, but still, she said, "Please do whatever you can because I cannot allow my husband to be prevented from going to 770 because of me."

She added that it was completely against her nature to burden me this way with an emergency, but because the Rebbe refused to leave her, she had no choice.

Of course, I made it my business to work that phone. I called the answering service, making it sound like a serious medical emergency. Then I bribed the only available nurse because she lived quite far and did not want to travel in the awful weather. Thank G-d, she agreed and came quickly, and

after she arrived, the Rebbe left to 770.

1985 – 1987

Over the next few years, during which I married off several more daughters, I would bring the kallah and chosson to the Rebbetzin to receive her brochah. The Rebbetzin always showed great interest in my family and all that happened with them, as well as my work with Mivtza Neshek.

Instead of the more typical "*kain ayne hara*," the Rebbetzin would say, "*umbarufun*," meaning "without too much attention being called to it," each time we were blessed with a simchah.

Before we would come for our engagement visit, the



Esther Gurary, on her wedding day. As per the Rebbetzin's instructions, the gown was ice pink; there was no tiara or tulle; the veil was of the same material as the gown; and she wore a shaitel immediately following the chuppah.

Rebbetzin would do a little research on the chosson's family, so as to be able to say something that would put him at ease. She spent so much effort helping people feel at ease in her presence, trying not to allow them to feel indebted to her.

In 1987, my fourth daughter Chanie was engaged to Yisroel Diskin. I knew the Rebbetzin was not feeling her best, and I did not want to bother her. My father, too, was against my taking the chosson and kallah to her. But I did not feel I could deprive Chanie of this, something that was such a highlight and a gift for my other daughters. So I thought we would go and make it very brief.

But the Rebbetzin would not let us make it brief. True to form, she was determined, despite her pain, to give this daughter and her chosson exactly what she had given the others.

She was so kind to the couple, so maternal, so loving and selfless, that at one point, without planning to, I picked up her graceful hand and kissed it.

Little did I know that this was the last visit we would have with her, for one year later, on Chof Bais Shvat (1988), she returned her pure *neshomah* to its Maker.

Her memory truly is a blessing to me, to my family and to Klal Yisroel. ■