

Accensione in Centro



‘Wherever The REBBE Sends Us’

MRS. BASSIE GARELIK

WELCOME TO PART I of a two-part series about the life of the clear-thinking and inspiring Mrs. Bassie Garelik, may she live and be well. Menucha Winner created this series from conversations with Mrs. Garelik, as well as recordings of a talk Mrs. Garelik gave to the Crown Heights Women’s Circle (chomenscircle.com) and an interview on the podcast Homesick for Lubavitch. We would also like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Mrs. Garelik’s children for their encouragement, help, and support: Rivkah Leah (Rivky) Hazan, Levi Yitzchok Garelik, Soshe Shaikevitz, Shterna Sarah (Sori) Krinsky, Chana Greenberg, Yosef (Yossi) Garelik, and Moshe Garelik.-Ed.

I WAS BORN IN 1938 to my parents, Sholom and Chaya (Ceitlin) Posner, both Russian immigrants who had been sent by the Frierdiker Rebbe to the U.S. from Israel in 1929, then they moved to Chicago, and then in 1942 to Pittsburgh where I was raised.

Growing up in Pittsburgh I knew of only three men in the whole city who had beards. One was a Rebbele who was mostly confined to his home, the second was a *shochet* who wasn't outside often as he lived right above his butcher shop, and the third, the one who was roaming the streets to find students for his school, was my father. His bearded appearance was quite a strange phenomenon back then and I was accustomed to being asked if my father was Santa Claus or if he was 100 years old. People would practically fall out of their cars staring when they drove past him.

I was about seven years old when Rabbi Dovid Edelman was sent as a *bachur* to teach in the school and became most likely the fourth person in Pittsburgh to sport a beard. I asked him, "Rabbi Edelman, aren't you ashamed to walk in the street like that?"

"Ashamed?" he repeated incredulously. "I'm proud of it!"

That story and countless others like it taught me more than any classes or lessons ever could. They shaped the person I am.

The Frierdiker Rebbe

I was about three years old when the Frierdiker Rebbe came to Chicago in 1942, where we were then living, to visit the Jewish community. It was my mother who cooked for the Rebbe, and my father served the Rebbe. We were scheduled to have *yechidus* on Sunday but that Shabbos we found out that the Frierdiker Rebbe's mother, Rebbetzin Shterna Sara, was *niftar* in New York. The Rebbe's visit was cut short, and I didn't get to see him until eight years later.

In 1948, my brother Rabbi Zalman Posner was chosen, together with Rabbi Mendel Baumgarten, to be sent to Paris to strengthen and encourage the newly arrived Lubavitcher refugees from Russia.



▲ Mrs. Bassie Garelik's mother Mrs. Chaya Posner with sons Zalman (L) and Leibel, 1930.

My mother, however, did not want to let him go. She feared that if he left yeshivah now he wouldn't return to finish his *smichah*. I was an impressionable eight-year-old, and I recall the scene. My mother was standing there crying, refusing to allow her young son to go off, so far away. My father was calling the Rebbe's secretary, to find out who had been the one to handpick those *bachurim* to be sent on this *shlichus*. The second they were told that it was the Frierdiker Rebbe who had chosen Zalman, quicker than a light that turns on when you flick the switch, my mother ceased crying and went to prepare him for the journey.

My parents didn't need to talk; they taught by example.

Two years later, our family was quite busy. Zalman had become a *chassan*, and my sister Kenny (Deren) was a *kallah*. The date of Zalman's wedding was set for Kislev; no time had yet been decided for Kenny's wedding, but my

father wanted it to be in Adar. When he informed the Frierdiker Rebbe of his leaning toward Adar, the Rebbe disagreed, urging them to make Kenny's wedding in Kislev as well. Needless to say, my parents heeded the Rebbe's words and my siblings got married a week apart.

Six weeks later was Yud Shvat [*histalkus* of the Frierdiker Rebbe in 5710/1950]. Now we understood why the Frierdiker Rebbe had wanted the wedding to be earlier.

My father had come to Lubavitch, to the Rebbe Rashab, right after his bar mitzvah, in 1915. He lived through the Rebbe Rashab's *histalkus* and the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus*, and was one of the very first *chassidim* to give himself over to our Rebbe.

I remember vividly my sister Kenny crying to my father after the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus*.

"How can you forget so quickly?" she asked him.

My father calmly explained to her that it's not an *inyan* of forgetting but that a Rebbe embodies the idea of *hemshech*. When my father would speak of the Rebbe Rashab, who would say a *ma'amar* with his son the Frierdiker Rebbe standing, facing him, he would say, "The Rebbe would say a *maamer*, and the Rebbe would stand opposite him." Confused,

I'd question, "Pa, which Rebbe?" He would only respond with one word—"Rebbe!"—because to him, it was all the same!

My First *Yechidus*

The very first time I went to *yechidus* with our Rebbe, it was just after [the Frierdiker Rebbe's *histalkus* on] Yud Shvat (1950). There was no one else there but the Rebbe, my mother, and me. I was only 12, and although the Rebbe spoke to me, I didn't answer, just stood there, awestruck. "She doesn't speak Yiddish?" the Rebbe questioned my mother. She laughed in response, since my parents *only* spoke to us in Yiddish! My mother then went on to ask the Rebbe for advice regarding my brother, and the Rebbe gave her clear guidance. My mother nodded and said, "*Oib zein melech zagt azoi, azoi vet dos zein*—If his king says so, it will be so." Something froze inside of

‘Rabbi Edelman, aren’t you ashamed to walk in the street like that?’
‘Ashamed?’ he repeated incredulously. ‘I’m proud of it!’



Family picture at Bassie's brother Zalman's wedding on 6 Kislev 5710 (November 27, 1949). Standing, L-R: Rabbis Zushe Posner, Leibel Posner, and Yechezkel Deren; Mrs. Kenny Deren. Seated, L-R: Rabbi Sholom Posner; his son the *chassan* Zalman Posner; the *kallah* Risia Posner; Rebbetzin Chaya Posner. On the steps: Sarah Rivkah (L) and Bassie Posner.



Bassie Posner and her younger sister Sarah Rivkah at their brother Zalman's wedding to Risia Kazarnovsky, in 1949.



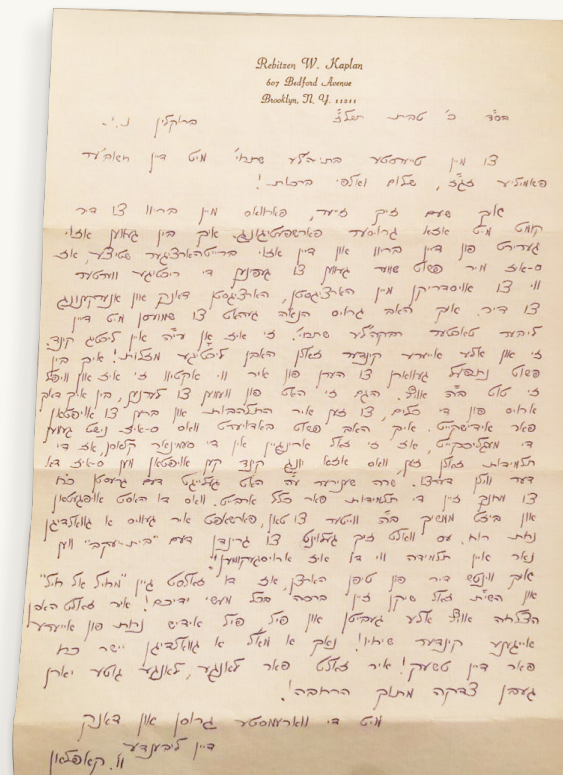
At Zalman's wedding. The young Bassie Posner is standing behind. Seated L-R: Mother of the *chassan*, Rebbetzin Chaya Posner; father of the *chassan*, Rabbi Sholom Posner; their son the *chassan*, Rabbi Zalman Posner; his sister, Mrs. Sarah Rivkah Sasonkin; the *kallah* Risia (Aunt Didi) Posner; mother of the *kallah*, Rebbetzin Chaya Freida Kazarnovsky; father of the *kallah*, Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Kazarnovsky.



The Rebbe at Zalman's wedding.



Three Rebbetzins at Zalman and Risia Posner's wedding (L-R): Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, Rebbetzin Chana, and Rebbetzin Nechama Dina.



me. *What?* I thought. *She called the Rebbe a melech to his face?* But the Rebbe didn't blink an eye. In that moment, the Rebbe became my *melech* as well.

Meeting My Husband

It's been over four years since my husband, Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik, passed away. Speaking about him still brings me great joy because he was a very, very, very special man—I can't emphasize it enough. My daughter, who is now involved with the seminary in Milan, Italy, just as I was, tells me, "Stop talking about Tatty to the seminary girls! You're giving them false hope. They're never going to meet someone like him." But I love talking about him.

Growing up, I went to public school until third grade and completed the rest of elementary and middle school at the yeshivah in Pittsburgh. Since Bais Rivkah wasn't around yet, I boarded for high school, attending Beis Yaakov of Williamsburg,

THE YOUNG BASSIE POSNER, a stellar student in Bais Yaakov, developed a very close relationship with the famous Bais Yaakov principal, Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, one of the distinguished *talmidos* of Sarah Schenirer, founder of the Bais Yaakov movement.

When Mrs. Rivky Hazan, the eldest daughter of Mrs. Garelik, visited Rebbetzin Kaplan and shared with her the activities taking place in Milan, Rebbetzin Kaplan was so moved that she penned a letter in which she praised Mrs. Hazan for her work and her *hislahavus*. She also praised Mrs. Garelik for her activities, noting that Sarah Schenirer had invested tremendous effort in educating girls not only in personal growth but also in *avodas haklal*—working for the broader Jewish community. Rebbetzin Kaplan wrote:

"What you have accomplished and continue to accomplish brings great *nachas ruach*, and it would have been worthwhile to establish Bais Yaakov even if only one student such as yourself had emerged from it."



Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik (R) together with his lifelong friend Rabbi Leibel Raskin (a pioneering *shliach* in Casablanca, Morocco) in Israel at the Lubavitcher yeshivah in Lud. Approximately 1955.

and I loved every minute of it. There were about 300 girls in the school, and every single one of them knew I was a Lubavitcher.

At 16 or 17 years old, we girls loved to discuss *shidduchim*. I used to shock all my friends by saying, “I don’t want to be number one by my husband. I want to be number two. Number one has to be the Rebbe.” They gawked at me, unable to even begin to understand, but it didn’t bother me one bit.

I was raised by *shluchim*, *geshvorene* Lubavitchers. To me, this mindset—that the Rebbe comes first, that the Rebbe knows best—was the most natural thing in the world.

It had always been my dream to go on *shlichus*. To me, it wasn’t an act of *mesiras nefesh*; it was plain and simple the very air I breathed. I would have needed *mesiras nefesh* not to go on *shlichus*! I grew up in a family where Lubavitch, Rebbe, and Chassidus were givens. There were no lectures; my parents lived it and that is how it was transmitted to us.

My husband, a Russian boy, had escaped Russia with his family and settled in Eretz Yisroel. He’d been smuggled out under a Polish passport—his documents said he was born in Vilna, though he had never set foot in Vilna. His birth date was listed as October 15th, though really he was born on Ches Iyar, sometime in April.

When he was about 20 years old, he confronted a missionary in Lod who was causing the community some trouble. Gershon Mendel beat him up and promptly landed himself in jail for three days. Proudly, he came home and to his father, who had sat in prison in Russia more than once, proclaimed, “Tatte, I was also in jail!”

Unfortunately, he now had a criminal record and when his friends left for America to be with the Rebbe, he was forced to stay behind. For three years he fought the bureaucracy

to secure a visa. Finally, he succeeded, and when he ultimately made it to New York, he refused to move two inches away from the Rebbe! The farthest he conceded to go was Newark, New Jersey, to serve as *mashpia* of the yeshivah in Newark (now in Morristown) —only because in case of an impromptu *farbrengen*, he could make it to 770 in half an hour.

Now, had I known all of this while we were dating, I would’ve swiftly said forget it—I was totally committed to going on *shlichus*, the further away, the better! But my husband was smart; he never mentioned anything about his desire to remain close to the Rebbe.

Our first date was on a Wednesday, just before Yud Shvat 5718/1958. Today, every boy and girl in *shidduchim* has a fancy resume. Back then we didn’t even know the word resume! Several hours before we were scheduled to meet, I asked our *shadchan*, Rabbi Yisroel Jacobson, what the *bachur*’s name was.

“Gershon,” he replied.

“Does he speak English?” That was my second question.

“No,” he admitted.

I turned to my friend Binny, with whom I was staying in Boro Park, and exclaimed, “Binny, he doesn’t even speak English!”

Nevertheless, we went out and conversed in Yiddish. We came to a little park and sat down together on a bench. He lit a cigarette (smoking was very common then, and socially acceptable) and when he noticed the smoke was blowing toward me, he immediately jumped up and moved to the other side to protect me from the fumes. It was that tiny gesture, so thoughtful for a *yeshivah bachur*, that impressed me.

But when I came home, I told Binny, “He’s a nice boy, but I’m not going to marry him.” Our date had been pleasant enough, but I felt like we were

coming from two different worlds, and I didn't feel any connection.

On Motzoei Shabbos there was a *farbrengen* for Yud Shvat. I was standing at the very back of the shul, listening intently to the Rebbe, when suddenly, the Rebbe called out:

"Harav Gershon Mendel Garelik!"

I froze. *Gershon Mendel Garelik! That's the boy I just went out with!* I looked around furtively, the words bursting out, but I knew I couldn't tell anyone and I didn't.

This had been the third boy I had dated and with each one the Rebbe had been involved and updated. My father told me that after this *farbrengen* the Rebbe had taken him aside and told him quietly, "You let two go by, don't let the third go by as well."

The minute I heard that, the decision was clear in my mind. "Okay," I said, "let's write *tena'im* and have it done." (Today we make a *vort* or a *l'chaim*. Then we wrote *tena'im*.)

But my father disagreed. "No," he said adamantly. "You have to decide for yourself."

Our second date was the next day, Sunday. On Monday I returned home to Pittsburgh, still unsure if I would see him again. Whether that bothered me or not didn't matter in the end because on Tuesday my father got a call. The Rebbe had decided to send Gershon to Pittsburgh to deliver the Yud Shvat *farbrengen* to the local *chassidim*. That's something that never happened before or after. It began to become clear to me what the Rebbe's intentions were; still, I knew the ultimate decision was mine. I was then teaching in the girls' yeshivah in Pittsburgh, and whenever I would spot Gershon Mendel on campus, I would run away, to the point that one of the teachers, Mrs. Miriam Beila Nadoff, nudged me, "Get out of here and go to him already!"

We met again over Shabbos. He proposed on Sunday. I had known him for barely ten days.

"*Ich hob gefunden vos ich hob gezucht*," he told me. ("I have found what I was looking for.")

I didn't say yes. I said, "I have to ask the Rebbe."

"Okay," he said slowly, "and where do you want to live?"

My answer was automatic and as sure as ever. "Wherever the Rebbe sends us."

His true reaction did not register on his face; it was only later that he told me how my response had shocked him. Where would you find an American girl in 1958 who would say something like that? Who would be as



Rabbi Gershon Mendel and Mrs. Bassie Garelik holding their two eldest children, Rivka, almost two, and Levi Yitzchok, about five months old.

dedicated to the Rebbe as that? But I couldn't see the big deal in it; I didn't know it was a rarity in those days; to me, it was natural.

With our probable engagement up in the air, we decided that I'd have some time to come to a decision. Meanwhile, Gershon Mendel would return to New York and when I traveled there in three weeks for a friend's wedding, I'd give him an answer to his proposal. He only requested that if I came to a decision earlier, I should let him know. I nodded in agreement and said I would, but in truth, I was torn. I really did not know what to do! So, I did the only reasonable thing—I wrote to the Rebbe. I poured out my worries, saying how unsure I was, how my head was telling me that he's a good *bachur*, but my heart was silent. I sealed my letter and sent it off, sure that I'd receive the guidance I needed.

No answer was forthcoming from my letter. So I wrote again, and again there was no response. Undeterred, I wrote a third time and then, finally, I received the Rebbe's answer in the mail.

"See him again," the Rebbe wrote, "and you'll be able to evaluate your feelings."

Three weeks later I nervously traveled to New York. We were to meet on Motzoei Taanis Esther. I was filled with anxiety. I was torn, and I was also upset at the *shadchan*, Rabbi Jacobson. I burst out to him, "I told you right away, *shreib tenai'm* —write up the *tenai'm*! Why didn't you just do it? What do you people want from me?" I couldn't handle the pressure. But that all disappeared the moment I walked into the room and saw Gershon Mendel sitting there, waiting for me. Instantly, it was all crystal-clear to me, and I felt foolish for not having realized it earlier. He was so obviously exactly what I wanted! I couldn't even

I thought perhaps I'd get a better reaction out of my mother, but she too responded with, '*Az der Rebbe shikt, fort men.*' ['When the Rebbe sends, you travel.']

articulate what it was that I wanted but somehow I just knew that he embodied all of that. I didn't say anything. I just looked at him and nodded. He smiled.

We celebrated the *simchah* of Purim by sending in our *tzetel* to the Rebbe and we became *chassan* and *kallah* on that famous day known as "Purim of Tof Shin Chai," when the Rebbe *farbrenge*d in an unusual, very *simchadik* way.

Moving on *Shlichus*

We were happily married and living in Crown Heights but I wasn't ready to settle down, I was full of energy, ready to set out on whatever *shlichus* the Rebbe would send us on. I kept writing to the Rebbe, waiting for the reply that would tell us where we were moving, but was yet to see a response. But when the *mazkirus* [secretariat of the Rebbe] began nudging my husband to get his documents in order, I grew excited and hopeful. Clearly, we weren't going to be staying in the States! In those days, when travel was nothing like it is today, and even long-distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive, moving out of the country was a pretty big deal, but I was ready for it.

Knowing that a big move was in our future, I proposed to my husband that we spend some time in Pittsburgh with my parents so that they could get to know him a little. After



Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik is remembered by Italian Jews as a man of vision, who did not see Jewish life in post-war Europe as it was, but as it could be. Rabbi Garelik is seen here (center, left) together with then-Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim on the latter's visit to Chabad's Camp Gan Israel Italy in the mid-1960s.



Rabbi Gershon Mendel and Mrs. Bassie Garelik, 5740/1980.

all, soon we could be halfway across the world and who knew how often we'd get to see them? But my husband, characteristically, refused.

"If we're moving away," he said, "then I have to spend every minute I can with the Rebbe."

I can't help but laugh when people talk about the romantic "*shanah rishonah*," the first year of marriage. *Shanah rishonah*? My husband sent me alone to Pittsburgh for three weeks while he stayed in Crown Heights with the Rebbe.

We spoke often by phone and one day he said, "Rabbi Hodakov told me we're being sent to Europe." Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Aizik Hodakov was one of the Rebbe's closest secretaries.

"Really?" I replied, my excitement growing. "Where in Europe?"

I could sense his shrug over the phone. "What difference does it make? We're being sent to Italy."

Italy? At that time the country was such a foreign, unknown place to me that I couldn't understand why we were being sent there. Surely there couldn't be any Jews in

Italy? The only Italians I knew were shoemakers!

I voiced my feelings to my father, but he wasn't at all concerned. "If the Rebbe is sending you," he said, "you go."

I thought perhaps I'd get a better reaction out of my mother, but she too responded with, "*Az der Rebbe shikt, fort men.*" ["When the Rebbe sends, you travel."]

We were to move to Milan, a city in northern Italy, just after Yud Tes Kislev. However, the very minute we became Italian citizens, two weeks prior to our scheduled date of departure, we decided to leave right away. We left on the 12th of Kislev and the Shabbos before the Rebbe spoke a long *sichah* about *shlichus*.

We were married only six months at the time.

It was a large crowd that escorted us to the airport; my family and many *bachurim* had come to send us off. One *bachur* looked around at the joyous crowd and commented, "I don't understand. Who is going to Italy?"

This particular *bachur* had accompanied another couple being sent on *shlichus* just a few weeks before, and in that scene, the young wife had been clinging to her mother, both crying, unable to break apart,



A Torah class at Chabad's Jewish school in Milan in the mid-1960s. Standing: Mrs. Bassie Garelik.



The young Rabbi Gershon Mendel Garelik at a Torah-scroll completion ceremony in Milan in 1972.

to the point that the pilot threatened to take off without them. But here, no one was crying—to the contrary! We were all excited! I was happy and excited! This was the beginning of the life I had dreamed of!

Our flight took us to France where we stayed for Shabbos. We went from Beth Rivkah to the yeshivah and back; not once did we go to see the Eiffel Tower. You can imagine my surprise when, after the Shabbos *farbrengen*, my husband came into our room, and he was crying. Soon he explained, “When I think about how I’m here, and the Rebbe is there...” and he began to cry again.

“The time will come,” he said staunchly, “when I will go to the Rebbe every month for Shabbos Mevorchim.”

I sighed, sensing his pain but knowing the reality. “Why do you want something that cannot be?” I asked.

My dear friends, when you want something badly enough, there is no such thing as “cannot be.” For the first ten years that we were on *shlichus*, my husband traveled to the Rebbe once a year for Chof Menachem Av, the Rebbes father’s *yahrzeit*. Although on a visa you could only leave once every two years, my husband had to risk it! After those first ten years, he began going much more frequently, maybe as much as ten times per year.

“I have no problem with you going to New York,” I told him, “but if we lose the *shlichus* because of your playing around, I’ll never forgive you.”

Finding a Home

Our first mission was to find a house to live in that would also double as our Chabad House. The local *balabatim* offered us a beautiful apartment but my husband nixed

it immediately, because it was too small to host crowds. They had another apartment to show us; it was rundown, and the parquet floors were so black you couldn’t even tell that they were wood. It was huge and empty; it had nothing but walls (for about six months I was without even a refrigerator). My husband walked slowly around the apartment, taking everything in, and then smiled in satisfaction.

“Ah,” he said, “this is *ufaratztdik!*”

We drew up a floor plan, indicating who would work where and what each room would be designated for, and we sent it to the Rebbe.

At every single *farbrengen*, for an entire year, the Rebbe had someone say *l’chaim* for us.

Once, following that *l’chaim*, an *eltre chossid* got up and proclaimed, “I heard they have 12 *komnitzes* [rooms in Russian]!”

“*Tzvel’f komnitzes!*” the Rebbe repeated. At that time the Rebbe was strongly encouraging *shlichus*, so the Rebbe replied in Yiddish in a loud tone: “Everyone heard it, that it was worth going overseas and learning in Tomchei Temimim for 10, 12, 13 or 14 years in order to have in Milan 12 rooms!”

Some people who were present told me that the Rebbe had all the *chassidim* at the *farbrengen* repeat three times the words, “*Tzvel’f komnitzes!*”

It wasn’t easy for my husband. It had been three months since we had left New York and he was desperate to visit the Rebbe again... ❧

Y”H MRS. BASSIE GARELIK will continue *farbrenging* with us in Part II of “Wherever the Rebbe Sends Us” in the Nissan issue of the *N’shei Chabad Newsletter*.