

כפר חב"ד

שבועון חסידי חב"ד באה"ק ת"ו

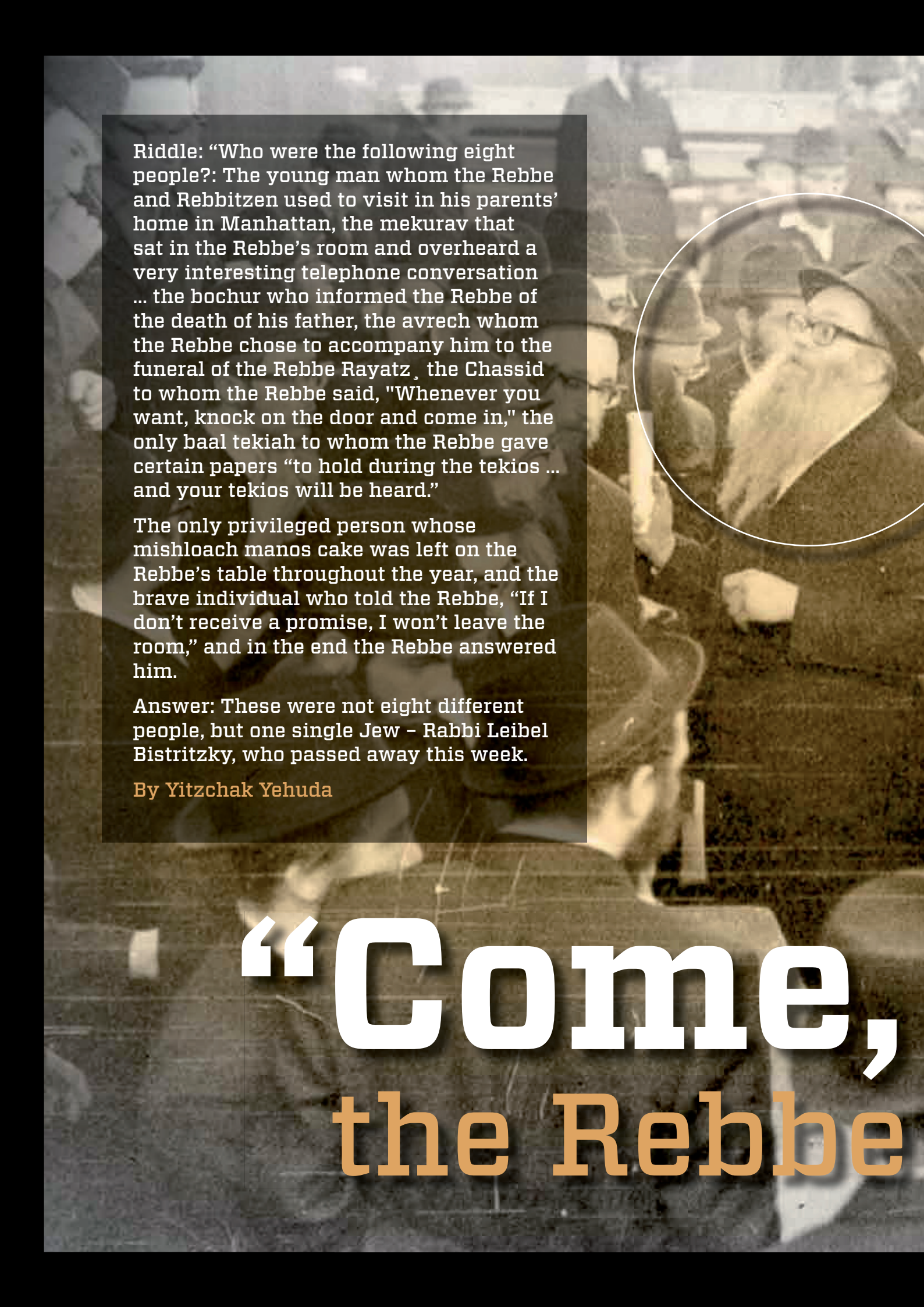
KFAR CHABAZ



A Regular Visitor to the Palace of the King

He was privileged to receive a visit from the Rebbe and Rebbitzin at his parents' home in Manhattan. He visited the Rebbe's room many times, informed the Rebbe of his father's passing, was chosen to travel with the Rebbe to the funeral of the Rebbe Rayatz, received holy papers "to hold during the tekios," and the cake he gave for mishloach manos was placed on the Rebbe's desk all year round. He was the only person to whom the Rebbe said, "Whenever you want, knock on the door and come in."

The fascinating life story of Rabbi Leibel Bistrizky, a"h



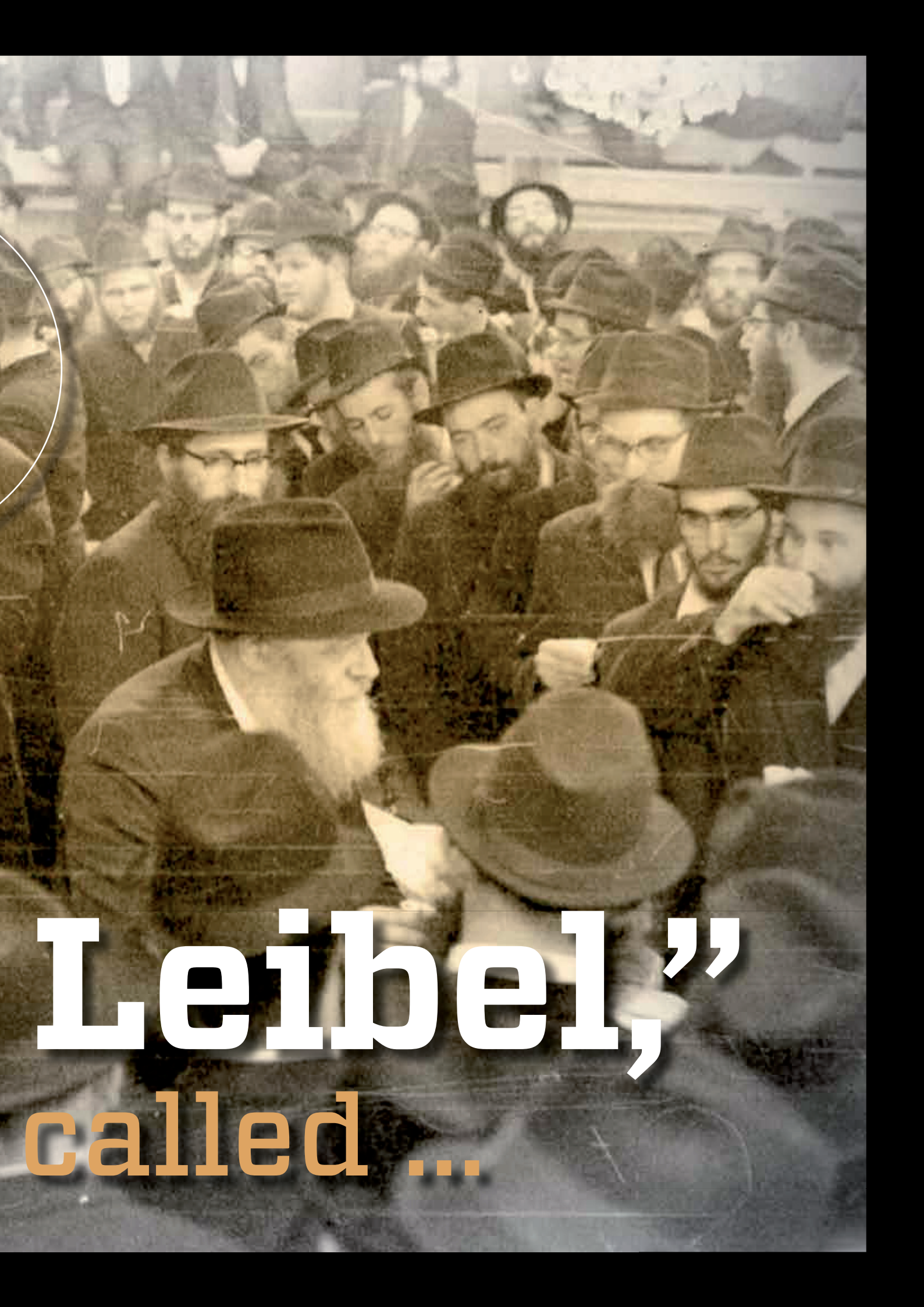
Riddle: “Who were the following eight people?: The young man whom the Rebbe and Rebbitzen used to visit in his parents’ home in Manhattan, the mekurav that sat in the Rebbe’s room and overheard a very interesting telephone conversation ... the bochur who informed the Rebbe of the death of his father, the avrech whom the Rebbe chose to accompany him to the funeral of the Rebbe Rayatz, the Chassid to whom the Rebbe said, “Whenever you want, knock on the door and come in,” the only baal tekiah to whom the Rebbe gave certain papers “to hold during the tekios ... and your tekios will be heard.”

The only privileged person whose mishloach manos cake was left on the Rebbe’s table throughout the year, and the brave individual who told the Rebbe, “If I don’t receive a promise, I won’t leave the room,” and in the end the Rebbe answered him.

Answer: These were not eight different people, but one single Jew - Rabbi Leibel Bistritzky, who passed away this week.

By Yitzchak Yehuda

“Come,
the Rebbe



Leibel,”
called ...

87 years

Most of these years were filled with action, but they were cut short on *erev Shavuos*, when Rabbi Yehudah Leib Bistritzky, patriarch of the large Bistritzky family, passed away. During his lifetime, he experienced many events, many of which were historical and of great significance.

“In fact,” one of his grandsons told us this week, “it’s hard to define our grandfather. On the one hand, he was a regular working person, and on the other hand he fulfilled so many important roles within [the Chabad movement].” After thinking for a few moments, he added, “Actually, my grandfather simply was a Chassid. A true Chassid.”

Indeed, he was a true Chassid. This definition could definitely be applied to the active personality of Rabbi Bistritzky, whose friends affectionately called him, “Leibel.” His tremendous acts of kindness always remained secret. He acted with a great humility that always astounded those around him anew, and he smiled upon everyone, whoever they were, helping many needy people.

Rabbi Leibel Bistritzky grew up in Hamburg in Germany, but in his youth



In his youth

he fled from there, away from the horrors of World War II. About a year ago, his grandson closed a circle when he was appointed as the city’s chief Rabbi, sixty years after his grandfather ran away, a moving event that we will return to later on.

Rabbi Bistritzky lived most of his life in the Crown Heights neighborhood of New York, where he also founded the famous organization “Hatzolah,” which has since become famous for saving the lives of many men, women, and children.

Rabbi Bistritzky, who passed away as the result of a major heart attack, was never a man of words. He agreed just once, in his distinguished life, to talk about himself after many entreaties and

requests from his son, the late Rabbi Levi Bistritzky, legendary former Chief Rabbi of Tzefat.

This was more than 20 years ago, in a rare and unique interview that he granted to me, during which he wept several times. The historical interview that he gave provided a small glimpse into his life. In this article, we will quote sections of this interview, along with descriptions from his family members and friends, who speak about his amazing personality.

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Even though he was born in Germany, Rabbi Bistritzky’s roots were planted very far away from there. On the side of his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Levi Levinger, “Torah and greatness dwelled at the same table,” as he was both a distinguished Chassid and a very wealthy man. Rabbi Levinger was one of the few Jews allowed to dwell in Moscow under Tsar Nicholas I’s Pale of Settlement decree, which generally barred Jews from living in large Russian cities.

Rabbi Levi Levinger got married in 5662 (or 5663). The *mesader Kiddushin* was none other than the Rebbe Rashab, who traveled to the wedding especially from



Passing by the Rebbe



With Rabbi Yekusiel Farkash

Lubavitch, which was a rare event in itself, as well as the no less unusual fact that the Rebbe Rashab wore a streimel. (In fact, the Rebbe Rashab's son, the Rebbe Rayatz, states in a famous *sicha* that his father would only wear a streimel when he was in Lubavitch.)

A few years later, R' Levik left Russia with his daughter, R' Leibel's mother. At first, he settled in Romania before moving on to Battenberg in Germany.

R' Leibel's father, Rabbi Mordechai Bistrizky, was a Boyaner Chassid who was born into a wealthy family in Kiev. Immediately after the Russian Revolution, he and his mother left Russia in a miraculous fashion, arriving soon afterwards in Lemberg, where his father was already staying. Together, the family traveled to Norway. Sometime later, R' Mordechai married R' Levik's daughter. (See the separate box.)

The young couple moved to Hamburg, where R' Leibel was born. One year,

when they traveled to Marienbad for a vacation, they met the Rebbe Rayatz. The Rebbe Rayatz's daughters had been very friendly with R' Leibel's mother when she was still living in Russia, and they were now reunited. This friendship, and particularly the friendship between Rebbitzin Chaya Mushka and R' Leibel's mother, continued throughout their lives.

By 5697, anti-Semitism had severely escalated in Germany, and following Krystallnacht many Jews fled over the Dutch border, reaching the city of Rotterdam. The Dutch took pity on the refugees and housed them in special camps. The Jews, for their part, mistakenly believed that the Dutch would not get involved in any war, a belief that was sadly proven false.

R' Leibel's parents first settled in Antwerp in Belgium, where his grandfather Rabbi Levi Levinger lived. From there, they moved on to Holland, where R' Leibel

celebrated his bar mitzvah. R' Leibel later related,

"I remember my grandfather coming to us from Antwerp for the *chaggim*. He also came for my bar mitzvah party, which was held in our home. When my father asked him to say something in honor of the bar mitzvah boy, my grandfather didn't hesitate. He stood up, put on his *gartel*, and began reciting a Chassidic *maamar*..."

In 5699, the winds of war were beginning to blow even more strongly and R' Mordechai Bistrizky decided to leave Europe. He very much wanted to move to Israel, but the bloodshed that was going on over there at the time put him off. In the end, he and the family moved to America.

His piercing gaze

R' Leibel described his first experiences on new shores:

"When we arrived in the United States, we first lived in Manhattan and then we moved to Boro Park. I started to attend Yeshivas Toras Emes in Boro Park, and every day it took me two and a half hours to get from Manhattan to Boro Park and two and a half hours back.

"When the Rebbe Rayatz reached America in 5700, my father and mother went to the welcoming reception that took place at the port. Unfortunately, my father didn't allow me to accompany them because I was 'green.' I didn't speak either Yiddish or English. I only spoke German and Dutch, and my father was afraid that I might get lost..."

But even though he didn't go to the port, R' Leibel was privileged just a few days later to go into *yechidus* at a very



Standing behind the Rebbe during Kiddush Levanah



Writing a letter in a sefer Torah



Walking around Crown Heights

unusual hour: several minutes before the Rebbe went into his first farbrengen on American soil. As R' Leibel himself related:

“On Purim 5700, a few days after the Rebbe Rayatz reached America, my father took my mother and the children to the Rebbe’s farbrengen at the Greystone Hotel in Manhattan. Before the farbrengen, my father approached Rabbi Eliyahu Simpson, who was responsible for allowing people into *yechidus*, and asked his permission to go in. The Rebbe gave his permission.

“When we were standing in the doorway, the Rebbe motioned that we should come inside. I saw the Rebbe sitting next to a small table, with chairs on each side. At this point, my father pointed towards me and said, ‘This is my son Yehuda Leib.’ I was then aged thirteen and a half. The Rebbe held out his hand and said, ‘*Sholom Aleichem*,’ and he looked at me. When I was in Europe, I had been in the presence of many great Rebbeim, but I had never experienced such a feeling.

“After the *yechidus*, we went downstairs and everyone present went into a grand hall that was packed with people. The Rebbe entered the hall and spoke into a microphone – which was very new in those days. Since I was a child who didn’t yet speak fluent Yiddish, I found it hard to understand his words, which were spoken in Yiddish. But engraved on my memory is the sight of many people – old and young – who were pushing to get a glimpse of the Rebbe’s holy countenance.

The grandfather who saved the Rebbe

Not many are aware that the individuals who saved the Rebbe and Rebbitzin from war-torn Europe were none other than R' Leibel’s grandparents.

“One day,” R' Leibel recalled, “my mother received information that the Rebbe, the leader of our generation, and his wife, the Rebbitzin, had fled from France and were in Portugal. My mother, who would speak with the members of the Rebbe Rayatz’s household, every day,

A Letter to our Grandfather We need help

G.B., a grandson:

My dear *Zeide*,

You are apparently surprised that I am writing you this letter. But what can I do? You adopted the unusual custom of not answering the telephone ...

All your life, you were connected and joined with every fiber of your soul to our Rebbeim in general and to the Rebbe Rayatz and the Rebbe in particular. You were *Beis Chayeinu*, and *Beis Chayeinu* was you. It’s no surprise that while I’m writing you this letter, my dear *Zeide*, I am reminded immediately of the letters that were written behind the Iron Curtain to ‘*Zeide*’ in the United States. You don’t answer the telephone? Apparently, you adopted an additional custom from the Rebbe, who hardly ever used the contraption.

You love people and are beloved to all, and you used this characteristic also for *Beis Chayeinu*. I accompanied you sometimes on Shabbos morning from your home in Geula to the shul in Shikkun Chabad for Shacharis, through the closed streets of the holy city, a few minutes’ walk for a healthy person such as myself. In fact, it would take us a long time, but not because you would lose your way, but because you were the kind of person who would pick up lost souls on the way. You would speak with every single person, rather like Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in his time: other types of Chassidim, Litvaks, people who wore knitted yarmulkes, and those who didn’t observe Torah or mitzvos at all. You smiled, asked, and showed an interest, as if you were lifelong friends or you were the grandfather of them all.

And here, as always, you would say a few words about the Rebbe, Lubavitch, or a particular Jewish custom.

I can’t forget you or your face. You ‘arranged’ a picture for yourself in every Chabad home, as your natural place was always behind the Rebbe in 770.

And to conclude, just one more thing:

Several times you told me that the Rebbe said that you could go into his room whenever you wanted. “The words of tzaddikim last forever,” and I’m sure that this still exists even today, and the Rebbe’s “door” is open for you at all times.

So please go to the Rebbe and tell him that we need him here, ten *tefachim* below, in a physical body. Tell him that it’s urgent. We need help here ...



The Boyaner Connection



Rabbi Leibel Bistritzky passed away on *erev Shavuos*. Despite the pressure of *erev chag*, the Boyaner Rebbe still accompanied R' Leibel on his final journey. Additionally, the next morning, which was *erev Shavuos*, the Boyaner Rebbe arrived at the family home to comfort the mourners and speak about the Chassid who had just passed away. In fact, Rabbi Bistritzky had a longstanding, personal connection with the Boyaner Rebbe.

R' Leibel's father Rabbi Mordechai Bistritzky was a Boyaner Chassid who was born to a wealthy family in Kiev. When he left Russia in 5677, during the Russian Revolution, he experienced a number of miracles and wonders. In the end, he and his mother reached Lemberg, where his father had already arrived and from there, the family traveled to Norway.

For Shabbos, R' Mordechai's father would travel to Rabbi Winkler, who lived in Copenhagen, but eventually he preferred to spend Shabbos with Russian Jews rather than with the *yekkes* in Denmark. When he heard that many Russian Jews were living in Battenberg, he would go there for Pesach. On one of those journeys, a match was suggested for his son R' Mordechai with the daughter of Rabbi Levi Levinger.

At that time, one of the Rebbes of Ruzhin was living in the city, and when R' Levi asked his advice, the Rebbe replied, "Grab him!" And this is how this match was made, between the daughter of a Chabad Chassid and the son of a Boyaner Chassid.

When the Bistritzky family reached the United States in 5699, at that time, as the son of a Boyaner Chassid, R' Leib became a *ben bayis* of the late Boyaner Rebbe. But the Rebbe told him several times, "You should be a Chassid of Lubavitch, and you can still come and visit me as a friend." And this is indeed what happened.



understood from this that the Rebbe and his wife had not managed to find room on the ship to the United States (the last ship to America).

"In the meantime, my grandfather had managed to flee from Antwerp to France, where he received a visa for Spain. My father, who also had business connections with Portugal, immediately called a Portuguese shipping company and reserved via a local agent two places on a ship bound for the United States. But my grandfather, who had arrived in Spain in the meantime, didn't manage to cross into Portugal due to the dogged refusal of a Spanish clerk to grant him a crucial signature on the visa. By the day before the voyage, my grandfather and grandmother had still not managed to reach the port, and they notified my father of this in New York.

"On the night before the voyage, my father visited the Rebbe Rayatz and told him that he had two tickets for a ship due to set sail in the morning from Portugal to the United States, and he was prepared to give them to the Rebbe and Rebbitzen. This offer was accepted, and when the necessary instructions had been sent to Portugal, the names on the tickets were quickly changed from 'Levinger' (my grandfather's name) to 'Schneerson,' and immediately afterwards the Rebbe Rayatz told this to the Rebbe.

"By the way, there was also another miracle in this story. On the day of the voyage, two ships were due to set sail for the United States at the same time. When the first one went on its way, the Rebbe announced that he would not be taking it, and later on this ship was torpedoed by a German submarine. The Rebbe and Rebbitzen sailed on the second ship, and they reached the United States safely."

(R' Leibel's grandparents, R' Levi and Ruchama, *Hy'd*, were taken to the Drancy concentration camp in France, from where they were transported to Auschwitz.)

When the Rebbe, leader of our generation, arrived in America, he and the Rebbitzen visited the home of R'

When Grandfather Returned to Hamburg

Rabbi Shlomo Bistritzky, Chief Rabbi of Hamburg



It was the summer of 5757, and the Jewish community of Hamburg had just moved into the Talmud Torah building – both in terms of the physical building and the concept. This large, imposing building had survived the Holocaust, including *Krystallnacht*, when the largest shul in north Germany, which lay next to it, was burned and destroyed completely. This was the Talmud Torah that every German in Hamburg knew to say was located at Number 30, Grindelhof Street. Many years after the Holocaust, the city of Hamburg decided to return the building to the Jewish community even though it had already made compensation payments for it in the past. The offices of the community and the kindergarten moved into their new premises, which underwent extensive renovations, but the upper floors remained empty.

This new situation led to a new path for the Jews of Hamburg. All of the Jewish elements in the city united to do something for local Jewry. The leaders of the community appealed to us, as the city's *shluchim*, with this offer: We have a building and the necessary permits for opening a Jewish school. You have the children and the families. And so we embarked on this journey.

For us, the Bistritzky family, it went far beyond opening a Jewish school in a city on *shlichus*. For the beginning of the academic year, we managed to gather twelve students

and this is how we started. According to German tradition, when a child first starts school, he brings a *Schule Tutte* – a bag that looks rather like an upside down hat, full of surprises. The child holds this bag, which is almost as big as him, and he marches with it to school for the first time in his life. When he gets home, he's allowed to open it and see the surprises that his parents have prepared for him.

And so on the first day that the Jewish school opened, after many battles on the inside and out, when the hall of the Talmud Torah was full of parents, community members, politicians, and media people who came to cover the opening, our little daughter Mussie was standing at the door

of our house with her *Schule Tutte*, ready to walk to school – and the telephone rang.

On the line was my grandfather, R' Leibel. He knew that much effort had been made to open the school, and he was very interested in every step that had been taken. He wanted to give blessings, for our success, but more than that – to six-year-old Mussie on starting school. He told her, "I bless you," with such emotion, and he wished her every success in her learning. He said: "Unfortunately, I had to stop learning at school to run away from the Nazis, to Holland and from there to America. I wish that you, and I'm sure that you will, complete your learning at this school ..."

Childhood memories

He was born here in the month of Sivan 5686 – 1926 – and he managed to learn in this building, the Talmud Torah building, for six years until the beginning of 1938, just a few months before *Krystallnacht*, a little before it became 'too late,' and he fled from here with his father and mother, brothers and sisters, and their lives were spared.

Since 1938, when he fled from Hamburg, my grandfather didn't return until 5764, a year after we arrived in the city and opened the Chabad House. Then, my father came here in honor of opening the new Chabad House building. It was hard, but he came here, accompanied by his sons R' Avraham



Yisrael (Yingy) and R' Schneur. The visit lasted several days, in which he returned to his childhood and shared many stories and facts that we had never heard about until then. He had a story about every street where we walked, and every name that appeared in the documents that we saw in the city archives brought back memories.

In the city of Hamburg, as in many other cities in Europe, gilded stones of about 10 x 10 cm have been put into the sidewalks and at the entrances of buildings where Jews murdered in the Holocaust used to live. These stones are called *Stolper Steine*, or "fallen stones." The idea is that anyone who sees these stones should stop for a moment and read the name of a Jew who was dragged from this house to a concentration camp and murdered. When we walked every morning from the house to the school, these names roused many memories, making him feel truly sad.

Next to the house on 64 Innocenziastrasse, the house where he lived, he recalled his father and mother, his grandmother Miriam Shaindel (next to whom he was laid to rest this week on Har Hazaytim, and it should be noted that she also passed away on 4th Sivan), and his Levinger grandparents, R' Levi and Ruchama Levinger, who lived with them in the same house. He was reminded of when they fled from Germany to Rotterdam, and they stayed there for a long time. He celebrated his bar mitzvah in Antwerp with his grandfather R' Levi, *Hy"d*. Peter Hess, the German from Hamburg who turned the stones project into a project for life, heard that my grandfather was coming to visit and he tried to complete putting up the stones at the entrance to the house on 64 Innocenziastrasse in time. But he didn't manage to do so. So he brought the stones with him to the opening ceremony at the Chabad House. My grandfather, who was known to be an emotional person by nature, burst into tears when he saw and held those stones. He felt that these stones should not only make a person's spirit fall, but they were also memorial stones, stones for revenge ... that the deaths of his grandparents were now marked by a memorial stone at the ceremony of the

opening of the Chabad House in the city of his birth. ... It was a moving moment that I will never forget.

Closing a circle

Grandfather's second and final visit to Hamburg was in the winter, last year. I was privileged after many years of working in the city to be chosen by the members of the community board to serve as the city's Chief Rabbi. Of course, my grandfather didn't want to miss my inauguration ceremony, and he made a huge effort to come to Hamburg with many members of the family.

That afternoon, an impressive reception was held in the city hall. Israel's Chief Rabbi Metzger was given the honor of signing the city's Golden Book, which only very senior guests, such as kings, presidents, and princes are privileged to sign. Present at the ceremony were the mayor, the president of the parliament, and other leading figures, who all came over to my grandfather, a former resident of Hamburg, to welcome him and congratulate him on this event.

Inside the city hall, there are many signs that recall Jewish life in Germany before the war and show the power that the Jews used to have in commercial and political life. When we left the city hall, we passed the main precinct on Monckebergstrasse, where, as my grandfather recalled, the office of his father, R' Mordechai, was located. R' Mordechai worked in importing and exporting oil from Scandinavia, and he would spend hours in his office. Between meetings, he would study from a small Gemara that he always had with him.

That day, we didn't hear what my grandfather felt about that evening's ceremony. But when he returned to Israel, he began to express it through stories that he would repeat to almost everyone he met. Even now, I still hear from other people about his excitement, joy, and pleasure that he derived from being able to participate in this historic event. Even just the week after his passing was announced, I have received many letters of condolence, all of which recall meeting him here during the past year and their impressions of him and his life story, and their happiness from having met him.

Leibel's parents several times, at first in Manhattan and later on in Boro Park.

"During these meetings," R' Leibel recalled, "there would be a friendly discussion over a cup of tea or coffee, but I wasn't present at all of them. Of course, when I knew in advance when the Rebbe and the Rebbitzten were coming I would try to come home early, but sometimes I would get home at the regular time, after the end of Chassidus *seder*, and I would see the Rebbe and Rebbitzten sitting in our house. Rebbitzten Chaya Mushka would speak to my mother in Russian, and I wouldn't understand a word, and the Rebbe would speak to my father. Of course, I didn't sit with them, but I would say, 'Good evening,' very politely and go to my room. But I still remember the excitement even to this day ...

"In those days, I was a *ben bayis* with the Rebbitzten and I would visit the Rebbe, leader of the generation, very often, mostly at his office at Merkos L'Inyonei Chinuch. When the Rebbe printed the *Hayom Yom* and the *sichos*, I was involved in preparing it for printing and liaising with the Schulsinger Brothers press. I also assisted with preparing the *kuntress Bad Kodesh*, the series *Sdei Chemed*, the *maamar Mayim Rabbim*, 5636, the works of the Tzemach Tzedek, and more, for printing.

"When the works of the Tzemach Tzedek were published, the Rebbe, who was then known as the Ramash, instructed me to come to his room. (By the way, the Rebbe always emphasized that I should only come to him during the breaks between the *sedarim*.) He gave me a set for free, since I didn't get paid for the work itself. This was a tremendous privilege, because Kehot had sold all of the editions of the works of the Tzemach Tzedek for *Otzar Seforim* in the United States, and the Rebbe only had five sets left. One copy was

given to the Rebbe Rayatz, another was for the Rebbe, leader of the generation, a third copy was for Rabbi Hodakov, and a fourth copy was for the Rashag. The Rebbe gave the fifth copy to me ... Similarly, I also received a set of *Sdei Chemed* from the Rebbe.”

Following all of this, R’ Leibel was privileged to be very close to the Ramash. For example, he recalled, “When I needed to go into the Rebbe Rayatz for *yechidus*, I would write a *pan*. I would show the *pan* that I had written to the Rebbe, leader of the generation, and he would make corrections and comments. He would tell me, ‘This part isn’t written properly,’ and he would correct it. Until today, I still have signed *panim* with the Rebbe’s notes, written in his holy handwriting!”

Later on, R’ Leibel gave the following description of this period of closeness to the Ramash:

“At that time, the Rebbe, leader of the generation, acted in a very modest manner and no one really knew him at all. Most people didn’t know who he was, but those who were close to him knew and felt that they were in the presence of a very lofty person of supreme holiness and stature.

“We – the dedicated *avreichim* who were involved with printing works such as *Talks and Tales* for the Rebbe – were privileged to see what went on inside the Rebbe’s room. For example, I once overheard parts of the Rebbe’s telephone conversations with students on subjects such as halacha and philosophy.

“By nature, I’m not a very shy person and sometimes I would approach the Rebbe, the leader of the generation, and ask him questions on Gemara or halacha. I would often go to him and give him a *sefer* or two as a gift. I have certain *seforim* that the Rebbe borrowed from me, and when he returned them to me I noted that the Rebbe had used them. ... In some cases, the Rebbe held onto my *sefer* for several months and then he would ask Rabbi Groner to remember



With his son, Rabbi Levi Bistritzky, a”h

to return the book to me.”

Things changed, however, after Yud Shevat 5710.

“During the months prior to accepting the leadership officially,” R’ Leibel recalled, “the Rebbe retreated very much into himself. When I spoke with the Rebbe, I was privileged to receive his full attention. But I tried as much as possible not to take too much of his time.”

“I sensed that my father had passed away”

When a notice arrived that the Rebbe’s father Rabbi Levi Yitzchok had passed away in the summer of 5704, the Rebbe Rayatz was in Morristown. The notice was received by the Rebbe Rayatz’s secretary, and it stated that the Ramash’s father was very sick. A short while later, on 24th Menachem Av, an additional notice was received reporting that he had passed away.

When the notice arrived, Rabbi Shmuel Levitin and Rabbi Yisrael Jacobson first called the Rebbe’s home, but Rebbitzin Chaya Mushka said that the Rebbe was not there. They did not tell her the purpose of the call, and they went on to the office (which later became the *yechidus* room). They were also joined by the *bochur* Leibel Bistritzky.

“When they knocked on the door,”

he later related, “no one answered. The only person who had a key to the room was R’ Sholom Chaskind. But he couldn’t come because he was in the middle of *sedarim*, and also who gave him permission to open the Rebbe’s room? ...

“We had no other choice than to sit and wait. The Rebbe would go to work in the morning and arrive at 3:15 or 3:30. Usually, the Rebbe was very organized and he would always arrive on time. Therefore, the delay began to worry us, until in the end the Rebbe opened the door from the inside.

“When we walked in, we noticed that the light in the room was off. The windows were shuttered, and the room was completely dark. When we told him the news of his father’s passing, the Rebbe asked if anyone had a small knife with them and I answered that I did. Rabbi Jacobson took the penknife and tore *kriyah* from the Rebbe’s clothes. Afterwards, they asked the Rebbe, ‘How come you were here all the time?’ The Rebbe replied, ‘This morning (or maybe he said last night), I sensed that my father had passed away and I wanted to sit shiva in 770.’

“Later on, the Rebbe sat shiva in the secretary’s office, where a class was held in those days. During the shiva, the room was cleared, leaving only a table, chair, and a bed.

When the notice arrived, the Rebbe had already davened Mincha, but a minyan was organized in the small *zal* and the Rebbe recited Kaddish.

“During the shiva, the Rebbe did not show his feelings outwardly, but when he recited the first Kaddish, he wept bitterly. I still remember how moved I was.

“When the Ramash got up from the shiva, he immediately traveled to the Rebbe Rayatz in Morristown. When he arrived, the Rebbe Rayatz gave a special *sicha* on the subject of bowing the head when reciting Kaddish and other customs of mourning.

“When the Rebbe, leader of the generation, returned to 770,” Reb Leibel continued, “he went over the *sicha* with Rabbi Sholom Chaskind so that he would type it, on condition that no one else received a copy. (The *sicha* was only printed years later in *Sefer Haminhagim*.)

“In those days, I was the only one of the *bochurim* in 770 who possessed a Hebrew typewriter, which I had brought over with me from Germany. Rabbi Chaskind asked me if I would allow him to use the typewriter to type out the *sicha*, and I agreed on condition that he would leave me a copy. ... Of course, when Rabbi Chaskind presented my request to the Rebbe, the Rebbe agreed.”

“Leibel, come”

Chroniclers have written that the person who had the privilege of driving the Rebbe to the cemetery for the funeral of the Rebbe Rayatz was Rabbi Leibel Bistritzky. In our conversation, he related:

“The Rebbe didn’t show anything outwardly. No tears were seen in his eyes. But I thought to myself, *who knows how much the Rebbe has wept to himself since the time of the passing until the funeral ...*

“During the actual funeral, I walked

next to the Rebbe. When some of the mourners took pieces of paper, signed their names, added a coin, and threw it all into the grave, others shouted at them to stop. But the Rebbe, leader of the generation, instructed that the signed pieces of paper should be left where they were.”

“At the time of the passing, I was already a young married man with a child. I had settled in Boro Park and on *Shabbos Mevorchim* I would walk to the Rebbe’s *farbrengens*. I would daven in Rabbi Simpson’s shul, go home, make Kiddush for my wife, and then immediately go to 770. When the Rebbe would leave 770 to go to his home on President Street, I would often follow him and accompany him, because my way back to Boro Park was in the same direction. Sometimes the Rebbe would turn to me and say, ‘Leibel, come.’

“I would follow him to his home, and sometimes the Rebbe would speak to me while we were walking about family matters and so forth.

“On one of these walks, the Rebbe said to me, ‘You surely deserve a big ‘reward for walking,’ because you also go all the way back to Boro Park on foot!’ I replied that there are just a few Chabad families here in total (most of the Chabad community lived in Brownsville), and I hadn’t been invited to the home of any Chassid in the area. In his youth, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Chitrik would eat at the home of his uncle, Rabbi Tzemach Gorevitch, and sometimes he would take me with him, but I told the Rebbe that I felt that it was hard for the family to host me, and so I preferred not to go there and to return home.

“The Rebbe didn’t say anything, but on *Shabbos Mevorchim*, Rabbi Zalman Gurary approached me at the end of the *farbrengen* and invited me to come to his home for the *Shabbos* meal. I asked him why he decided to invite me specifically at this time, but he didn’t answer me. ... I understood that the Rebbe had instructed him to invite me.”

The blue truck

It was very well-known that R’ Leibel was one of the only two Chassidim in the world who could go into the Rebbe whenever they wanted. When he was asked about this, he replied,

“It was a known fact that when there was a line of people waiting to go into *yechidus*, Rabbi Hodakov would tell people to come at 10:00 p.m. When those people who had been invited for 10:00 approached Rabbi Hodakov and said that it was already very late, Rabbi Hodakov would reply, ‘For the Rebbe, the time right now is 10:00 p.m.’ ...

“Sometimes, I was also among those for whom *yechidus* had been arranged at night, and I would always come early and go in at 10:00, but it also happened more than once that in the end I would go into *yechidus* at 2:00 a.m. or even at 4:00 a.m. In such circumstances, the Rebbe would say to me, ‘Why do you need to wait in line for so long? Knock on the door whenever you want, and come in!’

“My financial situation used to be very difficult, and one day I went into the Rebbe to ask for a special *bracha* for this issue. Usually, before I went into the Rebbe I would sit down at home or in the *beis medrash* and write everything down at length. Afterwards, I would then go over it and read it again, and I would only then go into the Rebbe.

“The table in the Rebbe’s room was always full of *seforim*. When the Rebbe would read a *pan*, he would sit in a slightly diagonal position, resting the *pan* on a small ledge that projected from the table, and he would read it while making notes on the back of the *pan* with a pencil.

“When I went in, the Rebbe read my *pan* and said, ‘The Holy One will help you.’ I felt that the Rebbe had given me a *bracha*, but I still wanted a clear promise. So I said to the Rebbe, ‘A *tzaddik* makes a decree, and the Holy One fulfills it.’ But the Rebbe said again,

‘The Holy One will help you.’ I told the Rebbe that I would not move from here until the ‘tzaddik decreed,’ and my eyes filled with tears. The Rebbe looked at me – apparently, he wanted to see if I really meant what I said – and in the end he said, ‘Nu, may it be as you said.’ From then, I started to live on miracles. Gradually, the situation improved until we saw this blessing-promise fulfilled completely over the years with our own eyes.”

Despite being given the special and rare privilege of being able to knock on the Rebbe’s door and go in whenever he wanted, R’ Leibel almost never used it. He recalled:

“Once, on *erev Rosh Hashanah*, which was on *Motzoei Shabbos*, I arrived at 770 and because I lived a three-and-a-half-hour drive away I only got there at 1 a.m. and I wasn’t allowed to go into *yechidus*. Even though the Rebbe told me a few times, ‘If you need something, you can knock on the door and come in,’ throughout all the years that I was privileged to have a connection with the Rebbe, I never did this except once or twice – and even then it was for the sake of another person’s health. But I never did this for my own personal needs. But what I did do that night was stand opposite the open door of *Gan Eden Hatachton* (where Rabbi Hodakov used to stand and daven).

“I took a *sefer Tehillim* and I began to daven. Afterwards, I intended to go home.

“Suddenly the door to the Rebbe’s room opened, and the Rebbe came out. When he saw me standing there, he immediately approached me and said, ‘Leibel, what are you doing here?’ I told the Rebbe that there’s a custom for a child to come to his father to ask for a *bracha* on *erev Rosh Hashanah*, and since I wasn’t able to go into my father, I was reciting *Tehillim*. The Rebbe then asked me, ‘Do you intend to blow the shofar this year?’ I replied that this was the case. Then the Rebbe said to Rabbi Hodakov, ‘Where are the *gelles* (pages of annotations) for the discourse



Ketapuach that was said on Shabbos?’ Rabbi Hodakov replied that they were in the Rebbe’s room (the discourse was published the following day). The Rebbe gave Rabbi Hodakov the key to his room so that he could bring them. When the Rebbe received the *gelles*, he gave them to me and said, ‘Hold these while you are blowing the shofar and your notes will be heard.’

“On another occasion, I was driving a large truck with all of my children. I was a *shochet* of chickens and in the truck there was a huge refrigerator where I stored the chickens. On my way home, I went as usual to R’ Yaakov Lipsker’s store to buy some kosher dairy products that weren’t sold where I lived.

Normally, I would put these items into the refrigerator and then go home. This time, a young man suddenly approached R’ Yaakov and said, ‘Did you know that the Rebbe is standing next to a parked truck right now, talking to a woman and some children?’ I asked which truck, and he replied, ‘the blue truck.’ It was my truck. It emerged that the Rebbe saw my wife and children sitting in the truck, so he came over to them and struck up a conversation with them.”

The wonder cake

R’ Leibel’s great and unusual closeness with *Beis Chayeinu* was expressed among other things by the fact that he was the only person whom Rebbitzin Chaya Mushka would call by his first



name, “Leibel.”

“Often,” R’ Leibel once related, “I would call the Rebbitzin or she would call me at her own initiative. Almost every Shabbos, Friday night, or after the Rebbe’s farbrengen, I would approach her to say *Gut Shabbes* and stay with her for a while. I knew one thing: If the Rebbe was at home or was supposed to be coming home, I wouldn’t go to the Rebbitzin. Once or twice it happened that the Rebbe suddenly came home on a Friday night while I was sitting at the table with the Rebbitzin. When the Rebbe came in, he immediately took my hand, took a Siddur, and began to recite *Sholom Aleichem*. Someone else might have stayed to hear the Rebbe’s Kiddush, but I got up and rushed out of the house ...”

R’ Leibel told the following story about the *mishloach manos* that he would bring the Rebbe every year: “Every year, I would bring the Rebbitzin *mishloach manos* that included a special challah that my wife would bake for the Purim *seudah*. When the Rebbe would wash his hands for the Purim *seudah* in his home, he would use this challah. The proof of this is that when the Rebbe gave out the remains of the challah, we saw that this was the challah that my wife had baked. ... As well as the challah, we added to the *mishloach manos* a large cake, a package of fine chocolate, and a bottle of vodka.

“During the year when the Rebbe spoke about *mitvza tefillin*, my wife made a



cake in the shape of tefillin with all of the miniature details. From then on, in the years that followed, the cake was always baked in a significant shape. When the Rebbe spoke about establishing 70 new institutions, my wife decorated the cake with little houses, and when the Rebbe spoke about returning to Jerusalem, the cake was baked in the shape of the Kosel. When the Rebbe spoke about *lechat’chila ariber*, my wife put a ‘fence’ in the middle of the cake, with a Jew jumping with one leg above the fence and the words *lechat’chila ariber* next to him.

“I do know that despite the many *mishloachei manos* that were sent to the Rebbe, our cake was the only one that was put on the table in the Rebbe’s house on Purim. When the Rebbe would come home, he would look at the cake and the message baked on it, and then he would

instruct that the *mishloach manos* should be sent to Beis Rivka or Beis Chana. The students would crumble the cake and prepare a much larger cake from it that would be distributed to everyone. This is also what the Rebbe would do with challah, which he would send every year to one of the *mosdos*.

“In 5748, after the passing of the Rebbitzin, I brought the *mishloach manos* to 770. I stood next to the door, and when the Rebbe went into his room after Mincha I approached him and said that I wanted to put the *mishloach manos* into his room. The Rebbe opened the door and told me to come in. I asked the Rebbe where to put the *mishloach manos*, and the Rebbe answered that I should put it on the bed that had been placed there. As always, the Rebbe stood this time and looked at the *mishloach manos* for a long time.”

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R’ Leibel left behind a large family. Everyone follows in the ways of their ancestors and is involved in reaching out to others on the Rebbe’s *shlichus*. He is mourned by his wife Ita and his sons and daughters: Miriam Shaindel Nelkin of Toronto, R’ Yosef Yitzchok of Flatbush, R’ Avraham Israel (Yingy) of Crown Heights, Raizel Greenwald of Toronto, Ruchama Klapman of the Five Towns, NY, Devorah Leah Cohen of Florida, R’ Menachem Mendel of the Five Towns, NY, shliach R’ Shlomo Mordechai of Agoura Hills, CA, and R’ Schneur Zalman of Manhattan. He was blessed with many grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all of whom follow in his footsteps and many of them serve as Rabbis and *shluchim* around the world.

R’ Leibel’s oldest son Rabbi Levi Bistrizky, who passed away during his lifetime, in 5762, was one of the *shluchim* who was sent to Israel. There, he served as the Rabbi of the Chabad community in Tzefat, eventually becoming the city’s Chief Rabbi. He wrote many *seforim* during his lifetime, particularly in the field of halacha, with the unstinting support of the Rebbe.