



Dr. Henry C., ז"ל, and Mrs. Rivkah Rhein, א"ח

A legendary couple that healed bodies and minds

When two strangers meet and find out they are *landsleit*, they often discuss familiar people and places. When two Far Rockaway “natives” meet, the conversation will generally include an unassuming couple who played an important part in so many lives. The narrative often starts like this: “Remember Dr. Rhein?” Even those who did not have the privilege of being included among Dr. Rhein’s patients fondly remember the iconic nameplate reading “H.C. Rhein, M.D.” in front of their abode on Beach Ninth Street.



The Rhein family history begins in Zurich, Switzerland. Victor (Avigdor) and Gustina (Gittel, nee Bendheim) were the proud parents of Ernest (born approximately 1910), Arno (born in 1912), Henry/Chaim (born in 1922), Meshulam (date of birth unknown), and a daughter who passed away in infancy. Ernest and Arno left to the States before World War II to open an American branch of the family’s textile business.

Afraid that the war in Europe might reach Switzerland, the rest of the family followed to the States in the 1940s and settled in Boro Park. The older brothers were involved in the Rhein family business (textiles), while Meshulem attended Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin and Henry learned in Yeshiva Torah Vodaas (and later, completed his B.A. at New York University). In 1946, Henry married the lovely Rivkah Bistritzky¹.

Mrs. Rivkah Bistritzky Rhein was born in 1925; her esteemed parents were Mr. Marcus (Mordechai) and Shifra (nee Lagovier) Bistritzky. In 1939, the Bistritzkys and their four children, Rivkah, Bella (Katzenstein), Leibel and Sender, escaped to Holland from Hamburg after Kristallnacht. Marcus

1. Interestingly, their *shidduch* was discussed by the Boyaner Rebbe and the Lubavitcher Rebbe while traveling on a train; the Boyaner Rebbe followed up and *redt* the *shidduch*.

R. H. Grumet

Bistritzky was known as an astute businessman who ran a fish oil company in Hamburg. Due to his foresight, he was able to get out his wealth and possessions as well, and when the family arrived in New York, they settled on the West Side of Manhattan. (Later, they moved to Boro Park, and then back to Manhattan.)

Rivkah attended New Utrecht Public High School and was tutored in Jewish studies at home. She attended a seminary her children remember her referring to as Bais Medrash L'moros and completed the teacher's degree, going on to teach for several years while earning a degree from Hunter College in Chemistry and Enzymology.

Sadly, Mrs. Shifra Bistritzky's parents, Levi (ben Yissocher Dov Ber) and Ruchma (bas Alexander Sender) Lagovier, *Hy"d*, escaped from Russia to Belgium but could not sail to America as did their children. They had tickets for passage by boat in Portugal but could not get a transit visa stamp for travel to Portugal due to the refusal of a Nazi official.

Shifra had been close friends with the three daughters of Harav Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, the *frierdiger* Lubavitcher Rebbe, and her husband had the presence of mind to offer the tickets to the Rebbe for his children who were still in Europe. These were the very tickets that saved Harav Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *zt"l*, and his wife, Chaya Mushka, *a"h*, and brought them to America. The Rebbe's family was forever grateful to the Bistritzky family and would often visit.

A postcard found among Mrs. Rhein's papers was sent from Ruchma to her nephew while they were in a holding camp in Drancy, France. The postcard is dated October 19, 1942, about three weeks before they were put on a transport to Auschwitz on November 11, 1942. A document shows that they were on the transport, but nothing about arriving in Auschwitz — presumably, they perished in transit.



Many years later, Mr. Marcus Bistritzky was *niftar* on Friday night while speaking at the *aufruf seudah* of his future grandson-in-law, Chanoch Lubling. Mrs. Shifra Bistritzky would not go in the ambulance on Shabbos,

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Dr. Henry C. Rhein while stationed at the air force base in Dayton, Ohio.

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but walked to the hospital instead. The *levayah* for Mr. Bistritzky, the Rhein children's beloved Opi, was held on Sunday morning, and Mrs. Rhein missed the wedding of her only daughter, as she was sitting *shivah*. Mr. Bistritzky was a larger-than-life presence in the Rhein family, and even the great-grandchildren still speak of him as a legend.



When the Bistritzkys lived in Boro Park, they *davened* together with the Rheins in Shomrei Emunah. The young couple got engaged and the announcement was printed in the Friday, April 5, 1946 edition of the *Aufbau* German-Jewish newspaper. Henry and Rivkah were married in the shul later that same year.



At that time, medical schools in the New York area had rigid quotas in place, and admission was extremely difficult for Jews. Henry therefore applied to and was eventually accepted at St. Louis Medical School, a long way from their loving families and *frum* surroundings. They lived frugally in a cold-water flat and had to carry ice up to the ice box. This was a far cry from the lavish lifestyle Rivkah was used to, but she supported her husband and the young couple lived happily.

The Bistritzky family was *makpid* to drink only *chalav Yisrael*, and Rivka continued to be *makpid* even after her marriage. This was no small feat in St. Louis in the 1940s. Her mother would send tubes of *chalav Yisrael* milk paste from New York, and she otherwise learned to drink her coffee black. Their first child, Rachel, was born in St. Louis in 1948. Their son, David, was born a year later in New York while his father was still in medical school in St. Louis.

There were many *nisyonos* in medical school. Henry spoke to the dean about the problem of taking tests that were given on Shabbos and he was given permission to take the tests after Shabbos... as long as he stayed in the classroom from



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when the test ended until the end of Shabbos. This was only one of many examples of his *mesirus nefesh* for Shabbos.

The Rheins returned to New York, where the young Dr. Rhein began the internship and residency programs he would need to complete in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a pediatrician. He conducted his internship at Willard Park Hospital in Brooklyn and the family lived nearby to be close to the hospital. They later lived on Lefferts Boulevard in Crown Heights while Dr. Rhein was a resident at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital (today the Interfaith Hospital). He walked over an hour each way every Shabbos because he did not ride on Shabbos, even in a car driven by a non-Jew.

Dr. Rhein was drafted during the Korean war and was designated to be sent overseas. *Baruch Hashem*, the day before he was supposed to ship out, he was given new orders and was instead stationed at Wright Patterson Airforce Base in Dayton, Ohio.

Dr. Rhein was a medical officer on the base, and Mrs. Rhein worked as a WAVE (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency service). She was able to obtain *chalav Yisrael* from a farm while on the base. While living in Dayton, Mrs. Rhein taught in a Talmud Torah that was held on Sundays. Dr. Rhein was honorably discharged from the Air Force in 1954 and the young family returned to New York.

Moving to Far Rockaway

It is presumed that the Rheins moved to Far Rockaway because Dr. Rhein's brother and sister-in-law Arno, *z"l*, and Edith Rhein, *a"h*, had settled there already. They came to Far Rockaway in 1955, and Rachel and David entered second and first grade (respectively) at the Hebrew Institute of Long Island (HILI).

Later, Mrs. Rhein's parents also moved to Far Rockaway, in order to live near their children.

The families initially all *davened* in the White

Shul (the original building really was white!) on Neilson Street, but when the shul moved to the new (and current) building on Empire Avenue, Mr. Bistritzky began *davening* at the Sulitzer *beis medrash*, while Dr. Rhein became one of the founders of the Young Israel of Far Rockaway.

Initially, there was opposition from other existing shuls, but the group received the charter and approval to start their shul on July 11, 1965. The members of the shul asked the Sulitzer Rebbe, Harav Shmuel Shmelka Rubin, *zy"ta*, if they could rent his basement, but the Rebbe would not accept money. In lieu of payment, the members of the *minyán* paneled the basement walls and *davened* there for three years.

Mr. Bernard Hoenig, Esq., remembers Dr. Rhein as an unassuming figure despite his status as a physician and one of the founding members, who could be found in the shul holding a broom, or straightening the tables. Rabbi Efraim Sturm, *z"l*, of National Council of Young Israel, brought some *sifrei Torah* that had been rescued from India to the fledgling Young Israel *minyán* at Rabbi Rubin's shul.

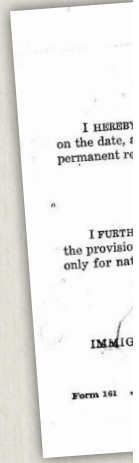
Mr. Hoenig fondly recalls the Simchas Torah dancing when the downstairs *minyán* carried the *sifrei Torah* upstairs and joined the Rebbe's *kehillah*. The warmth and friendship that the Rebbe extended is still remembered fondly.

The Young Israel *minyán* eventually bought a property on Beach Ninth Street, right next door to the home and office of Dr. and Mrs. Rhein. Dr. Rhein was very proud of his quiet involvement in the building and formation of the shul.

When Dr. Rhein met Rabbi Nachman Bulman, *zt"l*, a Rav from Danville, Virginia, at a retreat, he was so impressed that he arranged for him to stay at his house for a *probeh* at the new Young Israel. Rabbi Bulman became the first Rabbi of the Young Israel of Far Rockaway and remained close to the Rheins and his *kehillah* even after he moved to Eretz Yisrael.

Dr. Rhein *davened* in the Young Israel's *hash-kamah minyan* and would then learn with Rabbi Obadia Dubin, *ybl"c*. Throughout the years, Mrs.

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Rhein davened with her mother at the Sulitzer *beis medrash* and was very close to the Sulitzer Rebbetzin, Rebbetzin Shifra Rubin, *a"h*, and her daughters.

Beginning the Practice

Upon moving to Far Rockaway in 1955, Dr. Rhein started a private practice in his home on Beach Ninth Street; Lucy, a Catholic woman, was hired to stay all day on Shabbos to answer the phones and carry his medical bag when he made important emergency house calls on Shabbos. He was always careful with *shemiras Shabbos* and would not do *melachah* unnecessarily, as per a *psak* from Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*.

People would knock on the Rheins' door at all hours, and Mrs. Rhein would always have *rachmanus* — even at 2 a.m. She would convince Dr. Rhein to put on a robe and slippers and come downstairs.

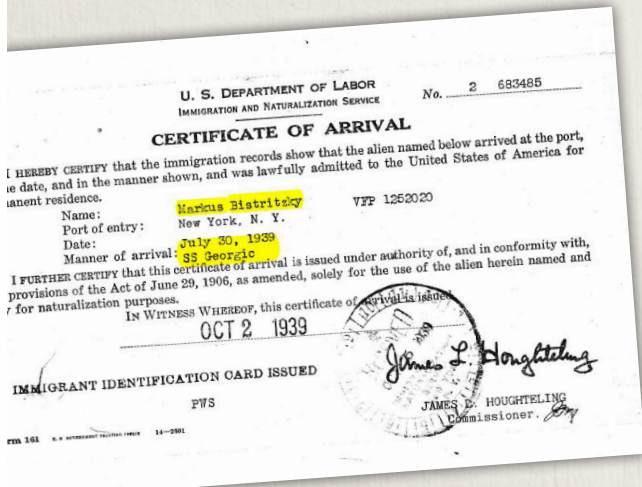
Initially, he did not charge for visits on Shabbos; later, his son-in-law Chanoch Lubling urged him to donate the Shabbos "income" to yeshivos, and a note would be posted that "This week's proceeds will be donated to Yeshiva X." If it was not medically necessary to treat the patient on Shabbos, he would instruct the parents to return on Motzoei Shabbos.



It was hard in the early years, as it takes time to build up a private practice. The Rhein children remember sitting in the waiting room to make it look like people were waiting to see the doctor. To keep busy, Dr. Rhein would cover for other doctors, and he sometimes drew in business from the seasonal visitors.

Mrs. Rhein assisted him in the office, and his sister-in-law Mrs. Edith Rhein worked there as well, ensuring that the office ran smoothly in her role as secretary.

Dr. and Mrs. Rhein worked together for over 30 years. They had different interests but they discussed their differences so that they complemented each other and achieved a harmonious balance. Their *shalom bayis* was exemplary: They were a unit, and they respected each other. They made time to enrich their marriage and encour-



Remembering Rockaway in Riddle

We all visited his office located on Beach Nine,
For checkups and vaccines and he helped us to feel fine.
He was gentle, but his manner strict and firm
And he could quickly diagnose any virus or germ.
A sister-in-law was in charge of appointments and bills
While his wife ably assisted and helped cure our ills
His "patients" never ran out, no matter how large the brood
And he taught our mothers to "NEVER COAX FOOD!"
He was a pillar of the community;
Of his *ehrllichkeit* they still do tell
A great credit is owed to him, as he helped to raise us WELL.

*P.S. The original lollipop box still hangs on the wall in between the exam rooms. Rhein's yahrzeit is 18 Cheshvan. Rockaway residents. (Their children continue to serve the community today). Dr. Rhein worked at the front desk. They are all fondly remembered by "old-time" Far Rockaway residents. Mrs. Rifka Rhein, and his sister-in-law Mrs. Edith Rhein assisted by, Dr. Rhein, his wife, Mrs. Rifka Rhein, and his sister-in-law Mrs. Edith Rhein he was known as an *ehrlliche* Yid who helped to shape the community. He was many years. He was held in high esteem in medical circles and, more importantly, for his *ehrllichkeit*. Rhein was a prominent pediatrician in Far Rockaway for*

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1 Baby Asp. now
1/2 " " in 3 hrs

aged young people to do the same, an innovative idea for that time.

Dr. Rhein was not afraid to speak with his patient's parents (mostly mothers) and talk about issues that affected the family. He would ask "Do you go out once a week with your husband? We do!" Tuesday was the Rheins' day off, and they spent time together going to concerts or walking on the boardwalk.



Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Kneseth Israel (aka The White Shul) refers to Dr. Rhein as an "*Ish Ha'eshkolos — shehakol bo,*" a well-rounded individual and a true *rofei cholim*. He was committed to the welfare of each individual — not just of his patients but of the whole community. "He was committed to his profession," Rabbi Pelcovitz says, "but was dedicated and helpful to the entire community. Both he and Mrs. Rhein were very much a part of the texture of our community."

The Rheins hosted many *bachurim* from Sh'or Yoshuv for Shabbos meals over the years, and took in lonely souls who sometimes stayed for a year or two.

Dr. Rhein was an excellent physician and expert diagnostician and was known to be a top "stitcher" — no going to plastic surgeons in those days. Dr. Rhein was well respected at the hospital but initially did not wear a *yarmulke* there, as he felt it was not professional. This all changed when his oldest grandson saw a picture of him and asked, "Zaidy, where is your *yarmulke*?" From then on, he wore his black *yarmulke* proudly in the office and hospital.

He was known to pay for medication for patients who could not afford it, and his patients can all recall his telling them he was giving them a "*boing!*" before a shot. The *boing!* was always followed by a lollipop from the famous lollipop box in the hallway.

A former patient remembers the "tough love" and fake gruffness with which Dr. Rhein teased his patients. She — and many others — always felt that she was his special patient. Many patients and their



parents often said that they considered the Rheins to be part of their family.

One mother wrote a letter in which she told him her friends in other neighborhoods were jealous because “you have a doctor like Dr. Rhein in Far Rockaway.” Parents felt that their children were in good hands; when speaking about Dr. Rhein, former patients recall how much they trusted and admired him.



In his commentary in *The Pirkei Avos Treasury* (ArtScroll/Mesorah), Rabbi Moshe Lieber explains how all *middos*, even humor, have a purpose. He writes, “Dr. Henry Rhein, a prominent pediatrician and a true *tzaddik*, was eulogized by Rav Shlomo Freifeld specifically in reference to his sense of humor. He spoke of the doctor’s uncanny ability to use humor to calm the nervous mothers of sick children who visited his office. This is a prime example of the use of *all* one’s deeds for the sake of Heaven.”

Dr. and Mrs. Rhein shared beautiful relationships with their *mechutanim*, Mr. and Mrs. Yaakov, *z”l*, and Miriam Lubling, *a”h*, and Mr. and Mrs. Willem (Zev), *z”l*, and, *tbl”c*, Estelle Wolf.

The grandchildren remember Pesach as the highlight of the year, and the *Seder* was all about the kids. Dr. Rhein would dance with them and take them on Chol Hamoed trips to the zoo and the circus. When the children went on camel rides, their *zeidy*, distinguished Dr. Rhein, went on a camel ride too. His granddaughter says that she remembers always feeling proud to be his *einikel*.



He was ahead of his time in certain medical practices. Mothers of former patients will remember his red stamp on all medical prescriptions that boldly said “NEVER COAX FOOD!” He also prescribed putting babies to sleep on their backs long before it was medically recommended.



Mrs. Faige Lamm remembers Dr. Rhein and his wife as special people; she describes Dr. Rhein as a “*tzaddik*.” She recalls that her son was the last patient Dr. Rhein saw and stitched. After a fall in school, Mrs. Lamm called Dr. Rhein’s office, not knowing how sick he was. Mrs. Rhein told her to come in half an hour, and when they arrived, she saw how ill he looked. He was so weak that Mrs. Rhein had to assist him, but they completed the job.

When it was time for the stitches to be removed, Dr. Rhein was no longer able to see patients, and they had to go to another physician. The doctor asked Mrs. Lamm who had stitched the child up, as he had never seen such beautiful handiwork. Even in his weakened state, Dr. Rhein’s work was unparalleled.



Mrs. Rhein traveled all over the U.S. for many years, performing her duties as the president of Torah Umesorah’s National PTA of Hebrew Day Schools. She would talk to mothers around the United States and convince them to enroll their children in Torah Umesorah day schools.

She was in fact the second national president, and would take along her friend Mrs. Irma Horwitz, the first national president, on her travels around the country. In the 1960s, she was invited to an education conference at the White House and attended as a delegate of Torah Umesorah. In those days, there were no expense accounts, and Dr. Rhein gladly paid for plane tickets and all expenses. Dr. Rhein was always very proud of Mrs. Rhein and her accomplishments.

When Mrs. Rhein was *niftar*, the family received an email from a woman thanking Mrs. Rhein for convincing her mother to send her to a Jewish school; as a result, she and her children and grandchildren are all *shomrei Torah* and *mitzvos*.

Mrs. Rhein also organized the famous Wednesday Torah Umesorah *shiur* in Manhattan, but since her schedule was so full, she could rarely attend. However, she would listen to the tapes of each lecture so that she could write a thank-you note to the speaker and include some snippets of their words to show her true appreciation.

When Dr. Rhein was sick, letters poured in from children and their parents. Copies of the letters, bound in a commemorative book, are a moving testament to what Dr. (and Mrs.) Rhein meant to the children and adults of the community.

The last Sukkos of his life, he was home in a hospital bed. The men *davening* next door in the Young Israel came with a *sefer Torah* and danced *hakafos* to be *mesame'ach* Dr. Rhein.

The news of Dr. Rhein's *petirah* on 18 Cheshvan 1985 devastated the Far Rockaway community. The *levayah* was held inside the Young Israel of Far Rockaway, an unusual event, but as a founder of the shul he was considered a *Rosh Hakahal*.

At the *levayah*, Rabbi Yitzchok Goodman, *shlita*, related that when Dr. Rhein saw that *meshulachim* were not being properly welcomed in the shul, he created and became *gabbai* of the Young Israel Charity Fund, which distributed significant funds for all who came collecting for *tzedakah*. Rabbi Goodman told the large crowd at the *levayah* that although the fund was called the Young Israel Charity Fund, in reality, Dr. Rhein had been providing the funds on his own. He announced that the fund would be renamed the Dr. Henry C. Rhein Charity Fund, but the shul would have to provide the funding in Dr. Rhein's stead.

Mrs. Rhein became an *almanah* at the young age of 59; Dr. Rhein was very much on her mind and she quoted him often. After Dr. Rhein was *niftar*, Mrs. Rhein worked in the office of Dr. Alan Brickman, who would later become a *mechutan* of Dr. David and Mrs. Leah Rhein. For the last eighteen years of her life, she worked in the office of Dr. Sigmund Friedman.

Even in the last five years of her life, when Mrs. Rhein was ill and suffering from great physical discomfort, she continued to visit her children and was a strong presence in their lives.

She was *makpid* to go to shul even when it was hard, and although she eventually moved to Boro Park to care for her mother, she would return to Far Rockaway for the Yamim Nora'im and *davened* in the Sulitzer *beis medrash*. In fact, she so inspired the other women and girls, they would often think, "How can I not stand for the whole *Ne'ilah*? Mrs. Rhein does!"

Throughout her life, Mrs. Rhein tried to help others and to do what she felt was the right thing. Her daughter says

that the theme of her parents' lives was "Don't do what you want to do — do what is right." Her grandchildren recall that she was often seen with a *siddur* or *Tehillim* in her hand and spent a great deal of time *davening*.

At the end of her life, Mrs. Rhein lived in Boro Park, across the street from her *mechuteneste* Mrs. Miriam Lubling, *a"h*. In order to be able to spend Shabbos with both their mothers, Chanoch and Rachel Lubling would stay with Mrs. Rhein, and she would host Mrs. Lubling and her aide as well. Although she was in poor health and it was difficult for her, Mrs. Rhein prepared food for each person to their liking — including the aide.



When news of Mrs. Rhein's *petirah* last year reached the Far Rockaway community, it seemed to be the end of an era. Today, the Far Rockaway community boasts many *shomrei Shabbos* physicians, including the Rheins' only son, Dr. David Rhein. Visiting his office and waiting room brings back memories to all who grew up going there as children and young adults. The familiar sight of the wooden blocks and firetrucks, the dolls in their paneled doll cribs, and the unforgettable lollipop box bring a wave of nostalgia to old patients. The mark that Dr. and Mrs. Henry Chaim and Rivkah Rhein, *a"h*, left on the community will remain forever. ●

Dr. Rhein's yahrtzeit is on 18 Cheshvan. Mrs. Rhein's first yahrtzeit was on 11 Teves. May their neshamos have an aliyah.

