

Feature / By Rabbi Paysach Krohn

An Inspirational Trip of a Lifetime

I have just returned from one of the most incredible trips I have ever taken. I could not have imagined that it would be so elevating and so moving, although I knew from the start that the ingredients were there. In a compact period of four days, fifty-seven *yeshivah bachurim* — all high school boys — joined me, Reb Abish Brodt and Rav Menachem Nissel on an incredible trip to Poland. It was truly life-changing, both for the boys and for us.

A number of months ago, I was approached by Mr. Ari Scharf and Rabbi Avrohom Moshe Kaufman, who head Project Mesorah, to lead a group of *bachurim* on a short trip to Poland. They felt that *bachurim* today should be familiar with the Torah legends of the past and become aware of the *mesirus nefesh* displayed by their ancestors during the worst times of the Holocaust. The idea sounded so noble that I agreed wholeheartedly, but truthfully, I had some hesitation.

Throughout the preparations, people warned me, “The attention span of kids today is much less than you are used to. None of them will want to hear your stories and speeches. *Bachurim* are not moved and inspired like adults.” I am happy to report that those naysayers were all wrong!

I knew that when Reb Abish Brodt agreed to come along, he would move them with his piercing *niggunim*. When Mr. Scharf agreed to bring along Rabbi Nissel (who had come with me to Italy and Spain), I was reassured that the *bachurim* would be entertained and educated as never before. And indeed, *baruch Hashem* the trip proved to be beyond what anyone could have imagined.

The trip began with a harrowing experience at JFK, as LOT airlines told us that because of technical problems, the plane we were supposed to fly on, a 787, would be replaced by a smaller one, a 727, which meant there were forty fewer seats! They threatened that not everyone would make the flight.

I could not get over the calmness, the expertise and the diplomacy of a young man named Eli Stein who somehow managed to keep the lid on things, never becoming ruffled, always going back to the front desk for more information, calming nervous parents (and myself) that all would be okay. The people behind the counter at LOT were trying to do their best, especially a gentleman named Eugene Frankowicz, and miraculously, eventually all of us were able to board.

In the waiting area, I noticed that one of *Klal Yisrael's* most beloved *askanim*, Mr. Benny Fishoff, would be on our flight. He was traveling to Warsaw for a gathering of Gerrer chassidim from around the world. I asked



Reb Abish Brodt, anticipating a wondrous trip



Rabbi Paysach Krohn



Rabbi Menachem Nissel on the bus



Rabbi Krohn addressing boys in Noizik shul

him to address the boys about the importance of such a trip and he graciously shared his thoughts with us. Mr. Fishoff told me a fascinating story about how Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt”l*, had guided him in determining the *yahrtzeit* of his parents, who were killed in the Holocaust. (However, for that story, you will have to wait for the next *Maggid* book.)

After our arrival in Poland, I gave the opening speech in the Noizik shul in Warsaw and was happily surprised that the boys seemed genuinely interested. I told them that Rav Shach once said, “A Jew who is not tied to the past has no hope of being con-

nected to the future.” I explained that Jews who lived in Poland thought they would be there until Moshiach. People said that the word for Poland in Yiddish was *Poh — lin*, a combination of two Hebrew words meaning “Here we will rest... (until Moshiach).” Tragically, this was not the case.

Rabbi Nissel gave an overview of Polish Jewish history and, after *Minchah* and our first *rekidah*, we were off to the Warsaw Ghetto wall and monuments.

Rabbi Nissel explained the debate about whether to participate that took place during the Warsaw uprising, and described the Torah perspective of the

Gadol Harav Menachem Ziemba, *zt”l*, who was in the ghetto.

Back at the Noizik shul for a surprise American style barbecue, we were honored to be addressed by the chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who spoke of a resurgence of *Yiddishkeit* in Warsaw.

As dusk settled, we had the great *zechus* to *daven* by the *kevarim* of the Chiddushei HaRim and the Sfas Emes. On the bus towards Ger, the boys learned the history of *Chassidus*, and *niggunim* were sung with gusto as a young man, Reb Baruch Schwartz, led the *bachurim* with his deft playing on the guitar.

As night covered the small quaint town of Ger, Reb Abish Brodt sang a song in honor of the Rebbes, *Shomrah Nafshi Ki Chassid Ani*. It was so moving and so hauntingly beautiful that I cried just watching and listening to him lead the *bachurim*, who stood alongside each other swaying, arms over each other's shoulders. The trip was becoming extraordinary.

In the Gerrer *beis medrash*, the singing and dancing would not stop. We still had a few hours' bus ride to Lublin, where we would rest for the night. But, these were *bachurim*, in a time zone of their own. Sleep? It's a good thing no parents were on this trip!

By now, the *bachurim* were bonding with each other and I was beginning to know some of their names. There was Yoni, Chaim, Naftoli, Boruch, Ellie, Benji, Yitzchok, Shmuel from Israel, and my grandson Sholom Mordechai Krohn, who was my “right hand” as he carried my bags, shlepped my suitcases, recorded my speeches, transferred them from his MP3 to our small laptop (how do these kids know all this stuff?), and took over 2,000 pictures that are by now organized, filed, and categorized on the hard drive. (I was *mamash* impressed.)

The next morning, we were ecstatic as we headed to Yeshivah Chachmei Lublin. The singing and dancing started as we got off the bus. It was electric. To see the awesome structure and yellow pillars of the yeshivah, to witness how they have refurbished this great building, to learn *Mishnayos* in the same *beis medrash* where Rav Meir Shapiro gave *shiurim*, was exhilarating. I told the *bachurim* stories that I had heard from Rav Pinchus Hirschprung, *zt”l*, the great *baki b'Shas* of Montreal, who was a *talmid* here in Lublin with Rav Meir Shapiro.

Reb Abish and Reb Avrohom Moshe Kaufman taught *Mishnayos* and then some of the *bachurim* mustered up the courage and taught *Mishnayos* as well. Yes, there was more dancing but, as we boarded the bus, Rabbi Nissel and I prepared the *bachurim* for what would be their



The Rebbe's tziyun



The Noizik Shul in Poland

first traumatic experience on the trip, visiting the concentration camp called Majdanek.

It is one thing to see pictures of the barracks where Yidden were forced to sleep in horrendously crowded conditions, but it is another to witness it and feel the hard wood and see the flat pads that served as mattresses. There seems to be an obsession in these camps with shoes. Thousands and thousands of pairs of shoes are piled and crushed together in huge glass encasings.

I told a moving story about a Jew in Brooklyn who donated a *sefer Torah* because he felt he had disgraced Hashem's Torah by wearing shoes given to him by a Nazi soldier that had the parchment of a torn *sefer Torah* as the instep of the shoe.

Rabbi Nissel had everyone gather in the gas chamber room. Tears rolled down our eyes as he spoke of the horrific end of life for thousands in the room where we stood. I said to the *bachurim*, "We can only imagine how so many Yidden cried out their final *Shema Yisrael* as they realized what was happening. In their *zechus*, let us cry out *Shema Yisrael* as we have never done before and make a commitment to *ahavas Hashem* as never before." Reb Abish once again sang a piercing *niggun* that he could hardly verbalize. The tears streaming down his face reflected the sadness we all felt for the demise of so many Yidden in this very place. We walked out into the sunlight but our heads were down, our voices were muffled, our hearts were broken.

We began the long, slow trek to where the ashes of thousands are piled. There, after words of *emunah* and *bitachon* and an incredible story about the Avigdor family, in which a father and two sons were unexpectedly reunited after the War, we sang the haunting melody that defined Jewish hope for a future, *Ani Maamin*.

To watch 57 *bachurim*, arm in arm, singing at the top of their voices — one felt a surge of confidence in the commitment to *Yiddishkeit* of these fellows. The experience was draining but fulfilling.

And there was so much more to come. I savored every minute of it, and we still had Lizhensk ahead of us that evening.

There are few places in the Jewish world like Lizhensk. For some reason, it is almost like *davening* at Kever Rochel or the Kosel itself. The Rebbe Reb Elimelech once said that anyone who *davens* at his *kever* would not leave this world before he does *teshuvah*!

After a delicious and long-awaited supper, we *davened Maariv* and made our way to the *tziyun* — to the building that houses the *kever* of Reb Elimelech. The *bachurim* heard stories and insights that Reb Elimelech and his brother Reb Zisha had taught. I pointed to the special *tefillah* that Reb Elimelech composed, which hangs on a huge laminated placard on a wall alongside the *kever*. We recited it together out loud, word by word. The crescendo reached at the end was tumultuous. It brought chills down my



Warm welcome at the airport

spine. The *tefillah* contains the famous expression "Aderabah.... — To the contrary, guide our hearts so that we see the virtues of others and not their faults..." Reb Abish sang those words as only he can, as Baruch Schwartz accompanied him on his guitar. The boys sang and then danced past midnight.

There was no place in the world any of us would rather have been than exactly where we were. It was that type of night. It was that type of trip. It was that type of experience. I thank the *Ribbono shel Olam* that we had that opportunity.

We traveled for hours through the night and, at about 4:00 a.m., arrived at the hotel we were to stay in, in Oshpitzin. We decided to *daven k'vasikin* (which was a half-hour later) and get some rest afterwards. This proved to be a wise move.

Hours later, we made our way to the Chevrah Mishnayos shul that had recently been rebuilt. Here I lectured on *tefillah*, after which we all learned *Mishnayos*. In the Jewish museum that is adjacent to the shul, we saw a video of people who lived in Oshpitzin before they built the notorious concentration camp there — Auschwitz.

On the video, numerous people spoke of their experiences growing up there. One of them was Mrs. Eva Bleeman of Toronto. With a refined elegance, she talked about the Bais Yaakov school that had been established there, and how she once saw Sarah Schenirer, who had come to visit the school that one of her students had started.

In the Auschwitz barracks, Rabbi Nissel told a most incredible story about *Birkas Kohanim*

under the most tragic conditions in the camp. A *kohen* was about to be put to death; his last wish was to bless his fellow Yidden. He was granted his wish.

Afterwards, Baruch Schwartz led everyone in the *niggun* that the *kohanim* sing while the *tzibbur* says their *piyutim*. It was incredible — the choice of song, the intensity with which everyone sang it, the place that it was being sung in — it was an unparalleled experience.

Walking in Birkenau to the crematoriums and then hearing Reb Abish recite the *Kel Malei* for the *kedoshim* that perished was unforgettable. I told the *bachurim* that, as we stand where people died *al kiddush Hashem*, we must focus on our future by making commitments to be *moser nefesh* whenever it may be called for in the future.

I told them how the Klausenburger Rebbe once explained that people who survived the Holocaust (including himself, who lost a wife and eleven children, *R"l*) and focused on the positive aspects of what they had and what they could build with, were able to rebuild their lives and their families. He translated the words "*b'damayich chayi*" as "in their silence they were able to live," explaining that the word "*b'damayich*" could be understood as "in their silence," from the expression "*vayidom Aharon*" — Aharon was silent.

It was Erev Shabbos but there were still two other sites that Ari Scharf felt were important to visit. One was the factory of Oskar Schindler, who saved the lives of many Jews by giving them jobs during the War. Outside the factory, I told the *bachurim* of other gentiles who acted in noble ways

towards the Jews during the Holocaust years, such as the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, the Japanese General Consul Sempo Sugihara, and the Honorary Consul of the Netherlands, Jan Zwartendyk. (See *Echoes of the Maggid*, page 213.)

We also *davened* at the *kever* of Sarah Schenirer, in *hakaras hatov* for all that she accomplished for girls' Torah education. I told them that at a meeting of *Gedolei Torah*, Rav Yechezkel Sarna, the Chevron *Rosh Yeshivah*, once asked, "Who was the greatest *marbitz Torah* in the last hundred years?" Some said the Chofetz Chaim, others claimed Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, while still others offered Rav Meir Shapiro. "You are all wrong," Rav Chatzkel said in his inimitable way. "It was Sarah Schenirer!"

Shabbos in Cracow included *davening* in the quaint shul of the Rema. It was a 15-minute walk from our hotel and we made the trek numerous times. By now, we all felt as though we had known each other for years; I had come to know so many of the boys' names. The warmth and ambiance of Shabbos were palpable. At each meal, *Mishnayos* were learned, *zemiros* were sung and speeches were given. Rabbi Avrohom Moshe Kaufman absolutely dazzled everyone at the Shabbos day *seudah* with his *divrei Torah*, enthusiasm and perspective of the future. He is a master *mechanech* and, like his great father, Rabbi Simcha Kaufman, who has been in *chinuch* for five decades, the young man has a great future ahead of him. In shul, I told the *bachurim* how the Rema had united *Klal Yisrael* by adding

glosses to the *Shulchan Aruch* that the Beis Yosef had written. He could have written his own *Shulchan Aruch* for Ashkenazim, as the Beis Yosef was Sephardic and often *paskened* like the Rambam or the Rif, who were Sephardic as well. However, the Rema wanted everyone to learn the same *Shulchan Aruch* and so, he wrote what is called the "*mapah*," the tablecloth, by adding footnotes to the Beis Yosef's work where Ashkenazic *halachah* and custom differed.

The boys heard stories of the Bach, the Tosafos Yom Tov and the Megaleh Amukos, all of whom are buried behind the Rema's shul in Cracow. The *melaveh malkah/siyum* and final banquet ended in the wee hours of the morning. There was no point in going to sleep anymore, so we walked again to the Rema's shul, where we *davened k'vasikin*.

That Sunday morning and afternoon, everyone departed, most of the boys going on to Camp Emes in Yerushalayim, led by Rabbi Eli Merenstein. Some of the *bachurim* had been to his camp before, but never had they taken this trip prior to their camp experience. Rabbi Merenstein is the quintessential head counselor/ director/friend of these *bachurim*. It was an honor to have him on this trip as well.

All in all, the entire trip was unforgettable, and it is one that Project Mesorah hopes that all yeshivah high school boys will participate in. Similar trips are being planned and one can only hope that they will be as invigorating and inspiring as this one.

For more information, call 845-642-3819 or email office@projectmesorah.org.



Bachurim saying the special tefillah of Reb Elimelech at his kever



Dancing at the kever of the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk



Dancing at the kever of the Rebbe Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk