

The Ruzhiner Rebbe and Me

By Amy Neustein | March 31, 2022

p. 82 Jewish Link EXPANDED Edition

As the world has convulsed in the past few weeks from the calamitous and unforgivable genocide in Ukraine, stories my late mother told about her fifth great-grandfather Yisroel Friedman suddenly became more real to me. He was the Ruzhiner Rebbe, from the Ukrainian town of Ruzhin. As a direct descendant of the Maggid of Mezritch, the main disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, the rebbe was referred to as “Der Heiliger Ruzhiner” (the Holy Ruzhiner). My brother was named in Hebrew “Yisroel” after our great-grandfather who was the grandson of the Ruzhiner Rebbe and bore his namesake.

The Ruzhiner Rebbe was known for his elegance and wealth. His sartorial make-up distinguished him from other Hasidic leaders. However, what has not been recorded in the annals of history is that the Ruzhiner did not achieve his wealth and prosperity by taxing his followers. Yet he lived in a palace, had a magnificent carriage, and wore exquisite clothes. My mother explained that the Ruzhiner had “such an amazing ability to feel, emote, and relate” to the non-Jewish world that many spontaneously heaped generous gifts upon him, including residence in one of their palaces. There was an almost preternatural halo around him. He was a descendant of Dovid Hamelech. Thus, it was not surprising that those in his presence would exalt him as a king.

In September 2002, when I wrote up my father’s memorial piece for The Jewish Press [Rabbi Abraham Neustein](#), I spoke about how my father was drawn to my mother’s unusually animated and bright face. Her ancestor, the Ruzhiner Rebbe, was known for his remarkable radiance that would light up a room.

The Ruzhiner was also known for his irrepressible optimism that was preserved and passed down to his progeny. I clearly saw that optimism in my mother and in my grandfather, Nathaniel (Noach) Friedberg (Ellis Island changed his surname from “Friedman” to “Friedberg”), who came to the United States from Russia in the early 1900s at age 12 after a six-month layover in Liverpool, having contracted conjunctivitis during the voyage. When he landed in Liverpool he wasted no time. He tacked signs to the doorposts that “a child chazzan” would be appearing in shul on Shabbat to sing for the congregants. His voice was so melodious and carried his amazing spirit. He was the great-grandchild of the Ruzhiner and inherited his charisma. He used that charisma to become a wealthy and philanthropic man in America. When he learned of mothers dying in childbirth and of young children dying of malnutrition, he took the bulk of his assets and funded milk stations all over Brooklyn and endowed the Margaret Sanger Planned Parenthood Clinic on Eastern Parkway.

Following in the footsteps of the Ruzhiner Rebbe, the charismatic Nathaniel Friedberg would later win over the hostile gentile community in Long Beach where he bought a summer home. In the early 1920s there were still signs barring “Jews and dogs” from entry to public places. Long Beach was rife with antisemitism. But he persevered until one Jewish family after another was permitted habitation in Long Beach, eventually building up a vibrant community of yeshivas and shuls. My mother would tell me how her father would inject her with mega doses of optimism when she’d come home from school in Long Beach with a bloody nose from the beebee guns that were shot at her on the bus by the non-Jewish children uttering hateful slurs. He would place her on his lap and say, “You are the direct descendant of the Ruzhiner” and you “must never forget who you are!”

My mother carried those lessons of sanguinity and optimism with her during those long days and nights she spent counseling my father’s congregants, who came to the rebbetzin with broken hearts and broken spirits, as the vicissitudes of life often show no mercy or surcease from sorrow. She imbued each of them with hope, strength, confidence and buoyancy. She saved many marriages that were on the verge of divorce, and saved many families whose children were falling into cults, drugs and other scourges. Her bitachon was so unusual, as its roots were in the Kingdom of David, who yearned to dwell in the house of God all the days of his life.

I was fascinated as a child to learn the stories of how the Ruzhiner’s daughter-in-law was a medical doctor who ministered to the Czar. She was also a very gifted dancer who taught her daughter, my mother’s grandmother, the courtly dances during the Czarist regime. My mother inherited such a love for dancing that she was chosen as a young girl to be the private student of Martha Graham, the founder of the oldest professional school of dance in the United States. In fact, she yearned to be a professional dancer but her father wouldn’t allow it because of immodesty.

In just a few short weeks, we have witnessed a modern-day miracle. A Jewish president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, has shown the world what bitachon looks like. He has shown the strength of a “David” against a “Goliath” – the strength of moral conviction and fortitude against unbridled tyranny. Certainly, a Jewish emissary of God who embodies the highest level of morals is now leading his country out of enslavement, persecution and annihilation.

Ironically, he shows no prejudice against the Christians in his country, despite the history of pogroms that consumed the lives of countless Jews. He shows resolute faith in God because every human being is a creation in God’s image. He is a sincere person, not a charlatan. A Jew who has risen to the occasion with unalloyed optimism and strength. He reminds me of my heritage, the Ruzhiner, whose legacy sustained my family for six generations – and continues to do so, as I make it a daily practice to have bitachon with every breath I take.

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