



The Ruzhiner Rebbe, Ukraine, And Me

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By Dr. Amy Neustein

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.



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Treated as Royalty

The Ruzhiner Rebbe was known for his elegance and wealth. His sartorial make-up distinguished him from other Chassidic 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.

He was a descendant of King David, *Dovid Hamelech*, and thus it is not surprising that those in his presence would treat him like royalty.

Optimism

In September 2002, I wrote in a memorial piece about my father, [Rabbi Abraham Neustein](#), that he 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. There was an almost preternatural halo around him.

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, whose surname was changed from Friedman by officials at Ellis Island.

Philanthropist

He 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 Shabbos to sing for the congregants. His voice was so melodious and carried his amazing spirit.

He was the great-grandchild of the Ruzhiner and had inherited his charisma, a trait he used to become a wealthy philanthropist in America.

When he learned of mothers dying in childbirth and of young children succumbing to malnutrition, he took the bulk of his assets and funded milk stations all over Brooklyn. He also endowed the Margaret Sanger Planned Parenthood Clinic on Eastern Parkway.

Winning over Long Beach

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 up 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 BB 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!”

Inherited Bitachon

As a rebbetzin, my mother carried those lessons of sanguinity and optimism with her during those long days and nights that she spent counseling my father’s congregants, who came to her 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 G-d all the days of his life.

As a child, I was fascinated to learn the stories about the Ruzhiner's daughter-in-law, 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 that were popular 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 for reasons of modesty.

A Ukrainian-Jewish President

In just a few short weeks, we have witnessed a modern-day miracle. A Jewish president of Ukraine, Vladimir Zelensky, has shown the world what *bitachon* looks like.

He has shown the strength of a "David" against a "Goliath" — that is, the strength of moral conviction and fortitude against unbridled tyranny. Certainly, whether he knows it or not, he is a Jewish emissary of G-d instantiating the highest level of morals as he leads 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 who lived there. Instead, he shows resolute faith in G-d because every human being is a creation in G-d's image.

Zelensky 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.

The advocacy work and scholarly contributions of Amy Neustein, Ph.D., have continued for almost 40 years despite her own tragic history of having been torn from her daughter by New York's Family Court system and several private agencies, including some that are Jewish-run. Instead of succumbing to despair, she turned her own tragedy into a platform for social and legal reform and is seen as a beacon of hope for women across the US, especially in the Orthodox-Jewish community. She credits her regal heritage for sustaining her in her decades-long struggle to reunite with her daughter.

She is also the founder of a NJ-based think tank for database engineering, scientific computing, and programming language theory; the editor-in-chief of a signal processing journal and of three academic book series; as well as the author/editor of 15 academic books covering a wide range of topics, including speech recognition, natural language processing, AI, and Big Data. Her most recent is Innovative Data Integration and Conceptual Space Modeling for COVID, Cancer, and Cardiac Care (Elsevier 2022).